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*Coexisting with the Indigenous:
Mary Chamberlain and the Paiute of Central California (1973)*

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Oral Interview with Mary Chamberlain, conducted by Virginia Eskew,
January 12, 1973, Newport Beach, California.

Introduction

The oral history transcribed below belongs to a collection held in CSUF's Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History (COPH) titled "Personal and Family History Collections." The interview with Mary Chamberlain was conducted by Virginia Eskew on January 12, 1973, in Newport Beach, California. This interview is 1 hour and 3 seconds long, and is archived as a digital recording/audio file at COPH (see "Copyright Advisory" below). The verbatim transcript edited here was prepared in the fall of 2023 by Natalie Melgoza and Madison Hardrick.

Mary Chamberlain was born in 1879 at Blackrock Ranch in Inyo County, California, between the cities of Bishop and Independence in the Owens Valley. In the interview, Chamberlain describes her earliest recollections of family life. When she was only six years old, her mother, Margaret Love Tibbits, died giving birth to twin boys, leaving her father, William R. Tibbits, and her uncle as the primary caretakers for the children. Eventually, Chamberlain's father sold the ranch and the family moved to a smaller property in Big Pine, California. After her father's death in 1896, Chamberlain became a skilled farmhand and rounded up cattle with her uncle. In recalling her upbringing in central California, Chamberlain highlights notable events in the region, including the first railroads in Inyo County and conflicts over the aqueduct constructed to bring water from the Owens Valley to Los Angeles in the early 1900s. In her later years, she married Edward Merrill Chamberlain whom she refers to as an "awful[ly] good man," and she paints a melancholic picture of how deeply she has missed him since his death in 1949.

Throughout the interview, Mary Chamberlain recollects the Paiute community near Blackrock Ranch. She and her Paiute childhood friends played together, making mud pies and playing with arrows. She describes the work Paiutes performed for the white ranchers in the community, such as assisting with ranch labor, while Paiute women helped with the wash and other household tasks. Chamberlain remembers Paiute families bringing their babies over to the ranch to show them off. She highlights some traditional Paiute practices, such as weaving baskets, doing beadwork, and making moccasins out of deer skin. Chamberlain

also recalls watching and actively participating in Paiute social gatherings. She recalls attending *fandangos* or powwows, where she and her siblings danced alongside their Paiute neighbors. Chamberlain notes the ways in which the Paiutes assimilated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, by wearing clothing similar to that of white ranchers. Chamberlain describes the relationship between the Paiutes and white settlers as entirely peaceful, asserting that the Paiutes never caused any trouble within the community.

Much of Mary Chamberlain's story focuses on her experiences coexisting with her Paiute neighbors. Her descriptions of Paiute cultural practices and customs add to our understanding of not only this particular Indigenous community, but also the relationship between Native Americans and white settlers in central California at this time. Chamberlain provides insight into rural life in the Owens Valley, as she describes her family's ranch and orchard. Chamberlain's interview will be of interest to researchers studying the history of the American West, particularly those examining late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century California. Scholars of Native American history and culture may also be interested in Chamberlain's perspectives.

Mary Chamberlain and Edward had one daughter, Vesta Bereneice "Bea" Hilton [BH], who was present during the interview, as was Chamberlain's granddaughter Shirley Morse [SM]. At the time of the interview, Chamberlain had taken up residence in Newport Beach, California, and was the last living member of her immediate family. She was ninety-four years old at the time of her death in November 1974 and was buried in Inyo County, California.

Only identifiable individuals, locations, and technical terms have been referenced in the footnotes, usually when they first appear.

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Verbatim Transcript (O.H. 1417)

LAWRENCE DE GRAAF CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

NARRATOR: Virginia Eskew [VE]

INTERVIEWER: Mary Chamberlain [MC]

INTERLOCUTOR: Vesta Bereneice "Bea" Hilton [BH]

INTERLOCUTOR: Shirley Morse [SM]

DATE: January 12, 1973

LOCATION: Newport Beach, California

PROJECT: Personal and Family History Collections.

TRANSCRIBERS: Madison Hardrick and Natalie Melgoza

VE: This is an interview with (pause) Mrs., with Mrs. Mary Chamberlain for the California State University, Fullerton Oral History Program by Virginia Eskew at Mrs. Chamberlain's home in Newport Beach on Friday, January 12, 1973, at 3:30. Mrs. Chamberlain, let's begin at the very beginning, and just tell me all about your background and yourself. Just where you were born and—

MC: I was born at the Blackrock Ranch¹ in Inyo County,² between Bishop³ and Independence.⁴

VE: Um-hm, and when was that?

MC: Eighteen seventy-nine.

VE: Oh, uh-huh, and—um, would you begin by giving us some information about your background, your earliest recollections?

MC: Well, my earliest recollection was my mother⁵ (pauses) and the family lived on this ranch (inaudible) and my nearest playmates were the little Indians that lived right close to us.

VE: Um-hm.

MC: Mm. And, of course, my mother died when I was six years old, and from then on, things changed. (pauses) It's kinda hard for me to—

VE: —Uh-huh.—

MC: —to tell you about it, but she died in childbirth when we were— and left us all— and now I'm the last one of the family living. All the rest of the children are dead, and my father⁶ and mother are both dead. And, um, (sighs) and

¹ Family-owned ranch in Inyo County, California.

² County in East Central California, established 1866.

³ City in the Eastern Sierra region of California, established 1903.

⁴ City south of Bishop, California, established 1862.

⁵ Margaret Love Tibbits (1845–1885), Mary Chamberlain's mother.

⁶ William R. Tibbits (1829–1896), Mary Chamberlain's father.

I've just (pauses) lived on and on from place to place, I was with an aunt and uncle for a while, and then I had some awful good friends, Bereneice's uncle⁷ and aunt took me and raised me. And I lived mostly up in Mon—Mono County⁸ in Mammoth⁹ when I was little and rode the ranges with my—well, he wasn't my adopted father, but they just took me and raised me.

VE: Um-hm.

MC: So, um, I rode the range with him whenever he want—wanted, uh, any help. I was tickled to death to get to go on, on horseback and ride after the cattle with him, and they were awful good to me, they were awful good to me. (sighs) And then, of course, I grew up, as kids do, and I was, I was married, and I've just had the one child, that's my daughter here. What else can I tell?

VE: Oh, I'd like to hear, why did your family, uh—

MC: My Mother died, and then my father didn't live too long after that, and I'm the last one of his family.

VE: Oh, I see.

MC: And, um, all the rest of 'em are gone. Last night I laid awake and lived it all over. I, I buried them all and, um, finally I was married, and I had just this one child—

VE: Why did your—

MC: —and—

VE: —family come, uh, to that area in the beginning?

MC: Oh.

VE: Your mother—

MC: Just early days.

VE: Uh-huh. Just (inaudible)—

MC: —I saw the first train road go down through from Reno¹⁰ to Keeler.¹¹

VE: Um-hm.

MC: And our place was right—there was just a river between us and the railroad,¹² and I saw the first train that went down there, and my father was a rancher and lived out on this big ranch. (inaudible, voice in the background) Did she say something to me? Uh, I don't know. Now I'm the only one left.

VE: Um-hm.

⁷ Presumably Mary Chamberlain's uncle (Vesta Bereneice "Bea" Hilton's great uncle).

⁸ County in East Central California, established 1861.

⁹ Town in the Sierra Nevada mountains, established 1877, now known as Mammoth Lakes.

¹⁰ City along the Nevada-California Border, established 1868.

¹¹ Formerly known as Hawley, located in Eastern California, established 1872.

¹² The Carson and Colorado Railway, developed in 1883, ran from Mound House, Nevada, to Keeler, California.

- MC: All the rest of them are gone, my sisters and my brother. I only had one brother, and my mother died in childbirth.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: And I can remember the night she died. The doctor held me in his arms and she, she kept saying, "Oh William be good to my babies, Oh William be good to my babies," when she was dying, and I can remember that, and I was only six years old when she died, but it, it stayed with me all these years. But I had an uncle that came and stayed with us for a while. And she's buried—my mother's bur—buried in Bishop, and my father was buried in Big Pine.¹³ And one sister was buried in Canada and two in Bishop, and I'm the last. I'm the tail end of the family, so—I, there was nothing only—I just, just lived on and on.
- VE: Well, tell me about your experiences with the Indians. You grew up with Indian children, that must—
- MC: —How all—
- VE: —have been—
- MC: —the playmates we had were Indians, and we loved them, and they loved us.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: They were just as nice to us as could be, and they ju—my—the Indian ranches, a lot of them were just under my father's ranch, but they were, they were awful good to us.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: And we loved them. All the playmates we had were out on this big ranch, and they—but they were just as nice as they could be to us. We just loved them, and they loved us.
- VE: What tribe were they? Just—
- MC: —Paiute¹⁴ Indians.
- VE: Paiutes, uh-huh.
- MC: Mm. Paiute Indians, but they were awful nice.
- VE: Did you get to know anything about the Paiutes, playing with them as children?
- MC: Oh, played with them—all, all, all the playmates we had was the Indians.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: And they were just nice as they could be.
- VE: Did you get to know anything about their customs and, and way of life and all?

¹³ Town in Inyo County, fifteen miles southeast of Bishop, California.

¹⁴ Indigenous peoples of the Great Basin region, commonly divided into the Northern Paiute, Southern Paiute, and the Mono groups.

MC: Oh, they had their *fandangos*¹⁵ and their, the, um, their *wickiups*¹⁶ and all that, you know? We loved them, and they loved us. They were all (laughs) we had. We, we just loved them just as much as they loved us.

VE: Um-hm.

MC: (thump)¹⁷ My mother and my father were always good to the Indians, and the Indians was always good to us. Just nice as they could be. We never had, um, a bit of trouble with them. (pauses) Sure loved them.

VE: Tell me. How did the, uh, railroad affect the area that you lived in when it came through?

MC: Well, it was on the other side of the, uh, valley, and there's a river between us and the, the rai – the railroad that came by there came from Hawthorne¹⁸ to Keeler. That's only – all we'd see of them. But the conductor was very fond of us children, and we would just leg, uh, leg it over there to the train to get to see him, and even though father – then one, one time he took me home with him to his wife and I s – I visited with her when I was a little bit of a girl and we had such a nice time. But, uh, we'd just try every d – time that we could to get over to the railroad station to see him because he'd usually bring us some candy or something like that, and we were all little tads, you know? We'd ride over there and tickled to death to see him, and he – they didn't have any family and they was, they was awful fond of us children.

VE: Did it affect that area much? The railroad coming –

MC: – Oh –

VE: – through? –

MC: – no.

VE: No?

MC: No.

VE: It didn't –

MC: – Not –

VE: – change.

MC: – not at all, we was quite a little ways from the railroad and the river was between us, but we'd always try to manage to get on our little ponies or get over to the railroad track, so that when the train come through, we'd be there for that conductor, he was so nice to us kids always bringing us something (laughs). Yes, we appreciated everything.

VE: Your father was a rancher you say?

MC: Yes.

¹⁵ Presumably referring to the Spanish folk dance and song typically performed in groups of two. Mary Chamberlain appears to use it as a synonym for powwow.

¹⁶ Indigenous term for hut, specifically in the southwestern United States, a.k.a. wigwams.

¹⁷ A thumping noise can be hear frequently throughout the entire of the interview.

¹⁸ Presumably Hawthorne, Nevada, established 1880.

VE: Uh-huh.

MC: Yes.

VE: Did he – uh, was – cattle? Is that a cattle –

MC: – Cattle. And he –

VE: – rancher? –

MC: – hadn't – No. It wasn't a big cattle ranch more of a "ranch" ranch, uh, with grain, and hay, and things like that, and we didn't have so much stock. We had stock but not – uh, it wasn't a real stock ranch. It was just more a big ranch with hay and grain and –

VE: – Um-hm. –

MC: – things like that. We had the delight of seeing the thrashing machine come every fall (laughs), and that was interesting to us, course, we were little. But my mother died when we were so little and an, and an uncle came from, uh, Waterville, Maine,¹⁹ to be with us, and he was with us, he was with us quite a little while before my mother died, and he was so good to her. He, he was a cook by trade, and he helped her with the home and with us little brats (laughs) (sighs).

[00:10:14]

VE: Well, did the Indians live right there on the ranch with you?

MC: No. They, they were out off of our ranch, but adjoining, their camp was adjoining. Oh, we just loved the Indians; they were so nice, (motor in the background) always so good to us, you know? (laughs)

VE: Was it a reservation? Is that –

MC: – No. –

VE: – what it was?

MC: No.

VE: No?

MC: Just, uh, camps.

VE: Um-hm.

MC: No, it wasn't a big reser – reservation at all. Just, just a few camps lived close to us, all really adjoined our ranch. But, uh, it wasn't, um, it wasn't a big camp. It wasn't just – oh, they'd be a bunch of Paiutes live here and maybe a little while – a little ways off there'd be another bunch of 'em. All around us was a bunch of – but they were good Indians –

VE: – Um-hm. –

MC: – they were good, they never weren't, uh, ugly at all it was about as fond of us as we was of them (laughs).

VE: Um-hm. Did you go over to the campsites much?

MC: Oh yes.

VE: Uh-huh.

¹⁹ City in southwestern Maine on the west bank of the Kennebec River.

MC: And they came to our place all the time and then, they mainly always came to do the washing for my mother (pauses) and any extra work that she could give them or she always gave it to 'em. And my uncle—bless his ole heart—he was, he was an awful good cook, and he was so good to help my mother when she had all of us kids, you know? She had lot to do, but he'd get in and help her.

VE: Um-hm.

MC: He was a darlin', and then when he'd get real tired, he'd lay down on the porch, put his head up on the step, and I'd comb his hair (laughs). My, I sure miss something like when he'd—(background noise) (pauses)—oh it was, it was a ni—nice life, I guess, is what a bunch o' kids could have without their mother.

VE: Could you tell us a little bit about the, um, Indian camps that you visited?

MC: Oh they—

VE: You remember anything about them?

MC: Oh, they're just regular Indian camps where their *wickiups* and their—places like that, but they were good they weren't, they weren't fighting Indians or anything like that; they were just good people. Yeah, we were very fond of the Indians, and they were of us. (laughs) And my mother and father was always very congenial to the Indians, you know? They (pause) were kind to them, too, and they worked for my father a lot, the Paiutes did. That's what they were, they were Paiutes. That's the tribe.

VE: What kind of work did they do for your father?

MC: Oh, any ranch work there was to do, haying and irrigating and weeding, and my father had a big orchard and, uh, y—they always worked in the orchard and, and helped wherever is needed.

VE: Um-hm.

MC: And he had, and he had—his place was right on the main road from Bishop to Independence, and they—our place was a stopping place for people that couldn't go all the way through or anything. They just stopped off there at the ranch, and then go on the next day. (inaudible)

MC: Well, we didn't, we didn't have anything in the house like we have now, and they had a big cauldron, uh, and the *Mahala*²⁰would come, a *Squaw*,²¹ and do our washing and help my mother any way they could like that. And weed in the garden and help with the picking of the fruit. My father had a nice orchard, lovely orchard, and they'd always come down to help my mother.

VE: What kind of an orchard was it?

MC: Apples and peaches and pears and plums and cherries and everything like that. I had a—he had a lovely orchard and had this big ranch, and he always

²⁰ Term denoting “woman” in an unspecified Native language. See [online](#).

²¹ Sexual and racial slur for Indigenous women in North America.

- had a nice big strawberry patch and big garden and no interference because they weren't awful near neighbors. They were quite a little space between our neighbors, but they were all nice neighbors, we never had any trouble with our neighbors.
- VE: Um-hm.
- SM: And those old *Squaws* would go and have a baby –
- MC: Yes.
- VE: Oh, would you tell me about that? My gosh –
- MC: Oh, they're so cute. Well, I never was at their camps when they had their babies, but they always had their babies and brought 'em down for us to see and admire.
- BH: Mother, tell 'em about Ole Ninny²² when she went and she came to ours, and then I – we took our – her food out to her, to, to there, and she was gone. And when she would say she'd come back, she had gone out back in the woodshed and had her baby and then come back and washed it in the ditch and then went on with her washing.
- VE: Oh goodness.
- MC: But the Indians were awful nice to us, and we was nice to them. We loved the Indians, and they loved us.
- VE: Oh, would you –
- MC: – And they were the only playmates we had – children, white kids, had around there.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: We didn't have any white, close neighbors, only the Indians. And it was that – the ranch was what they call the Blackrock Ranch.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: It was the – all the ro – all the big rocks around there were black.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: You know? And they ca – they called it the Blackrock Ranch.
- BH: It was really lava wasn't it, Mom? Isn't that rock really lava?
- MC: Well, kind of a lava, but most of it had been burned years ago when I, while we were – there more of a la – lava rock.
- VE: What kind of games and things did you play with the Indians?
- MC: Arrows.
- VE: Arrows?
- MC: We had arrows, and we played with those, uh, played and made mud pies, and we didn't have the gifts that children have now to play with, and we didn't have dolls or anything like that, you know? We were really little rough necks. (pauss) We had a big high board fence around where the corral was, and we'd get up – climb up on the outside and tease the cows

²² Presumably a reference to a Paiute woman.

- on the (laughs) inside, and they'd come running over to the fence, and all we'd fall back in on—onto the street. But we existed.
- VE: What, um—When you went over to the railroad to watch the trains come in and all, do you remember when they were putting the railroad in?
- MC: No—
- VE: —(inaudible)—
- MC: —I—the—well I—it wasn't finished. It was quite a long while after I can remember that they finished that clear down to Keeler.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: But they only went from Kee—from Hawthorne, Nevada, down to Keeler. That was just close to Independence, and, um, we just loved to see that old train go by. And then the conductor and, and all of 'em ate over us little kids, you know, and bring us candy or things like that, and we'd always tried to meet that train (laughs).
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: But it was a river between us and the railroad and, of course, we had to be careful of that.
- VE: Do you remember the name of that river?
- MC: Owens River.²³
- VE: The Owens River?
- MC: O-W-E-N-S. Owens River, yes it was.
- VE: Did the railroad make the area you lived in any larger? Did people come there more?
- MC: No, they—well it's never this, uh—towns along down through the valley, but, um, there was never anything built right close around the railroad. Independence was two, three miles from the, from the railroad, and our place wasn't that far. There was just really the river and just a pasture between us and the railroad. But—and it was close to the White Mountains instead of the Sierra Nevadas.²⁴
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: We were right in between.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: See (pauses), after my mother died, of course, my father eventually sold his ranch.
- VE: And then where did you go?
- [00:19:59]
- MC: I went to Bishop to live with my daughter's uncle and aunt.
- VE: Um-hm.

²³ River east of the Sierra Nevada mountains.

²⁴ Mountain range between the Central Valley of California and the Great Basin.

- MC I was just a little tad, my mother died, and she lost twin boys when she died, and I can just remember her the night she died. She kee—my father was sitting on the edge of the bed, and she'd say, "Oh, William, be good to my babies. Oh, William, be good to my babies." She was dying, and she did die, and we were left without a mother.
- VE: Um-hm. Well, how long did you live in that area after she died?
- MC: Well until I was old enough to, to go and live with niece's uncle and go to school.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: But I lived down in a (inaudible) place. We—
- VE: —Did you go to school with the Indians, too?
- MC: No—
- VE: —Um-hm. —
- MC: —No. I didn't go to school until after I left down on the ranch.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: And, and went up to live with her uncle and aunt.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: So, then I, uh, went to school. I went to the West Bishop School.²⁵
- VE: Um-hm. Do you remember when that was? When you started school?
- MC: No, I remember—it was, I think, about when I was eight—
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: —years old.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: I don't know for sure.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: I don't remember, and I lost a lot of my data the—even after that. You know, I was old enough to copy things down, things like that, and then they were all lost.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: Scattered.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: So, I don't remember, and my memory isn't very good, see?
- VE: Oh, I think it, it sounds just great to me.
- MC: We didn't have any awful close neighbors. We had one neighbor that was the closest. Well, we had two that were pretty close to us, but not—they didn't join—they joined onto the ranch, but not in the ranch.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: They—and the neighbors were all awful nice to us.
- VE: Did you have get-togethers and things with the neighbors—
- MC: —Oh no.—
- VE: —sometimes?

²⁵ Presumably a school in Bishop, California.

- MC: No, we were too little for that. —
- VE: —Um-hm. —
- MC: —After, after we grew up a little while and my father sold his ranch and moved to Big Pine.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: And then I went to school from—when I was up there. But when we was down on the ranch, I wasn't close enough to school, and we were too little, too *chiquita*.²⁶
- VE: Why did your father sell the ranch?
- MC: Well, my mother died, and he had to take the children, so we could get to schools and places like that, and then he bought a ranch in Big Pine, and then we moved up to that ranch and —
- VE: —Oh. —
- MC: —left the ranch down by Independence. Then we—when we went to Big Pine, where we could go to school close to us.
- VE: Um-hm. And what, what type of a ran—was it the same type of ranch as the one before?
- MC: No, it was just a small orchard and a home.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: It wasn't a ranch; it was just a small place. But, it was right close to the school and close to town, close to neighbors, places like that. Otherwise, we was way out by ourselves. Um. —
- VE: —Did it change your life much? —
- MC: Oh. —
- VE: —Your move? —
- MC: —No. I do—I, I don't know? My sister went up to Hawthorne to live, and I went up there and she, she die—she died up there. Oh, I don't know, just all mixed up. And life—there's so much, I forget. Just enough.
- VE: Oh, I think, I think this is just so interesting. I wish you'd, um, tell me about your, your life there on the new ranch and —
- MC: —Well, we were close to town there and we had lots of neighbors, and the neighbors were awful good to us. Or those kids, you know, they were awful nice to us. We liked it there, we wasn't very far from town and we, and we was close to school and —
- VE: —Um-hm. —
- MC: —we liked it there and we had lots of nice neighbors
- VE: You couldn't play with the Indians there then, you didn't?
- MC: Oh—
- VE: —You weren't in—
- MC: —we did to a certain extent—
- VE: —Uh-huh. —

²⁶ Hispanic term of endearment for “little girl.”

- MC: – play with them. We liked ‘em. We liked the Indians, and the Indians liked us (laughs).
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: Yeah. Yes, we liked the Indians. They were the only close playmates we had until we moved to Big Pine.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: We sure liked the Indians.
- VE: Do you, um—do you (pauses) remember much about the, uh, Indians’ camps and things as far as maybe how they looked? Do you remember how they looked at all?
- MC: Oh yes.
- VE: Uh-huh—
- MC: We, we—it was like close to the Indian camps when they had their *fandangos*, and we always seemed to manage to go and see them.
- VE: Oh, tell me about one of their *fandangos*, that sounds interesting.
- MC: Oh, they’d just get in a great big circle, and all of us kids we’d get in with them.
- VE: Oh.
- MC: And then “ya ya ya ya ya” (laughs). We thought that was a lot of fun.
- VE: Were they the dances and things like that?
- MC: Well, not too many.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: No, they had us—they’d circle—they’d all, um—each one take hold of each other and they’d be a great big round, and we’d get in with them and “ya ya ya ya” go around and round and round. We thought that was a lot of fun.
- VE: Oh sure. What were the purposes of those dances, do you know? I—
- MC: –I think just to have a good time. That’s the way it looked to me (laughs).
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: Anyway, we had a good time. (laughs)
- VE: Did you ever, um—were you ever around when the Indians had their burial, um, burials? And things—
- MC: –No. —
- VE: –like that?
- MC: I never was, was with them when their—any of the burials. No, I do—I don’t remember ever being in one of their burials.
- VE: Um-hm. Their, um, their birth practices, the things they did when they—it went off by themselves is that what—
- MC: –Sometimes, yes. —
- VE: –you said? Uh-huh.
- MC: Yes.
- VE: Could you tell—
- MC: –And—

- VE: – me more about that?
- MC: – and they had, they lived in *wickiups*, you know, built with willows –
- VE: – Oh. –
- MC: – and things like that. They didn't have buildings like these at all, Not too – in the early days. But they had, um – took willows and things like that and built their *wickiups*. That's what they called them, *wickiups*, and have a little hole in the front that they could go in and out. But, uh, (pauses) I don't know. They, they, and they, they, uh, copied the white people lots, you know?
- VE: Oh.
- MC: You know, they – anything they liked very well, they'd copy from the white people.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: And that pleased the white people, too (laughs).
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: No, we were very fond of the Indians, they were really good. They were. They weren't quarrelsome, and they didn't, (pauses) they didn't steal and things like that, like they had the name of doing, but we never had any trouble with 'em.
- VE: Did any of the townspeople or other ranchers have any problems with them?
- MC: Not that I know of. (pauses) They worked for the white people, too, you know? They worked on ranches, and they worked, the *Squaws*, with these washings and things like that for the white people. I don't know, they were awful good neighbors. Just good neighbors. (pauses) No, we didn't have any trouble with them though.
- VE: (background noise) They were your closest companions then –
- MC: – Um-hm. –
- VE: – during that period? Um-hm.
- MC: Yes, they were awful nice. We really liked the Indians, and they liked us.
- SM: She's a terrific fisherman right to this day because of those early days with fishin', I imagine.
- VE: Oh, you learned a lot from them then?
- SM: Hunting and fishing and –
- VE: – Oh, tell me about some of that.
- MC: (laughs)
- VE: I'd really like to hear that.
- MC: Well, I didn't do so much fishing until after we left our ranch and got up into Bishop. And I, there – then I fished, but I just fished because I liked to (laughs).
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: (sighs) And I, I never was unhappy as an – as my niece's uncle would say, "Well, c'mon, I want you to help me with the cattle today." And I'd have

- my horse, you know, and ride with him all day. He just thought that was fine, and I did too. I just loved him. He was a cattleman. He had cattle on the river, and he had to have some help, and I was delighted to do it.
- VE: What did you have to do?
- MC: Ride horseback, and round up cattle, and –
- VE: – Oh. –
- MC: – change ‘em maybe from one feeding place to another. But he was always with me, my little – I just loved that little horse.
- [00:30:34]
- VE: Did you learn to, uh, fish from the Indians –
- MC: No. –
- VE: – or did you learn to fish –
- MC: – No, I learned from white people.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: No, I don’t think they let – they fished as much as white people our way.
- VE: Um-hm. (pauses) Do you think you learned some other things from them, maybe?
- MC: No, they, they taught me some things, hm. (laughs)
- VE: Like what?
- MC: Oh, just how to camp, things like that, but we mostly played. (background noise) Kids played (laughs), little work. (pauses) My father had a nice ranch, had a big berry patch, of course, we had to help with that. You know, he had a big orchard, um, that suited us. We liked that ole orchard, peaches and cherries and everything like that.
- VE: Did he sell those products? And –
- MC: – Yes, and then it’s – my father’s brother lived with him, and he put out fruit and things like that and helped my mother.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: He was awful good to help her. He was a cook by trade, anyway, and he was awful good help to my mother and all of us kids. (pauses) And I’m the only one left.
- VE: Did he, um, ship some of his goods out on the train?
- MC: No, he’d take ‘em in to Independence, it’s only a little ways.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: But I don’t, I don’t know – I don’t remember about him shipping anything or not. (pauses) I wasn’t interested, I guess.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: (laughs)
- VE: Did you go to Independence with him ever?
- MC: Oh yes.
- VE: Did ya? Um-hm.
- MC: Yeah.

- VE: Would you tell us about some of those trips?
- MC: Well, the people down there were awful good to us in Independence 'cause we were a lot – just a bunch of motherless kids, you know? And the people down there were interested in us and would be often nice to us and, uh, for many years I had a half-sister that lived down there. Yeah, but she was adopted by some other people, so I didn't get to see her much. And finally, when she moved to Bakersfield,²⁷ her adopted father was a judge, (pauses) and, uh, they moved up to Bakersfield, so I didn't get to see her much. And then she went back to Maine, and I had another half-sister back there. (pauses) Just a mixed-up life.
- VE: When did you leave that area completely?
- MC: After I got married.
- VE: Um-hm. Did you get married when you lived in Bishop?
- MC: Um-hm. (pauses) Yes.
- VE: Would you like to tell us some – about that? About your marriage and –
- MC: Well, there wasn't very much to tell about it. I wasn't married for long, (pauses) and then I moved from the valley to live up there after I was married.
- VE: Was your husband a rancher?
- MC: Well, sort of. He wasn't a rancher like my father was, but he lived on a ranch and did, did what he had to.
- VE: Um-hm. (pauses) And then you were w – married to the world's finest man?
- MC: I sure was married to a wonderful man. (pauses)
- VE: Later. Um-hm. Would you like to tell us about that?
- MC: There's not much to tell about this, we were awful happy. He was an awful good man and came from an awful good family.
- VE: Where was this? That you lived?
- MC: Bishop.
- VE: In Bishop? Um-hm. (pauses) How long did you live in Bishop then?
- MC: Gosh, I don't know how long I was there. How long did I live in Bishop, Bea?²⁸
- BH: Oh, I don't know, you've been down here for twenty-some odd years.
- MC: And I'm ninety-three years old so –
- VE: So, seventy-some? (pauses) When did you, um, when did you, uh – or did you watch the area of the Owens Valley²⁹ change much?
- MC: Oh yes.
- VE: Did you see a lot of changes?

²⁷ City in Kern County, California.

²⁸ Vesta Bereneice "Bea" Hilton (1898–1986), daughter of Mary and Edward Chamberlain.

²⁹ Valley in Eastern California.

- MC: Oh yes. W – we saw a lot of changes, and the towns changed and grew, and more ranchers came in.
- BH: City of Los Angeles³⁰ went up there.³¹
- MC: Yes, the city of Los Angeles interfered with it.
- VE: How – how did they interfere?
- MC: Come up there to get our water.
- VE: Oh, the Owens River, uh –
- MC: – Um-hm. –
- VE: – aqueduct. Was that what it is?
- MC: Um-hm. They had a lot of water trouble there for a while.
- VE: Oh, would you tell me about that?
- MC: I don't know very much about it.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: I know they (pauses) tried to take it all, but they didn't get it all.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: People kind of fought back a little bit.
- VE: Um-hm. Especially the ranchers I imagine it would –
- MC: – Yes. –
- VE: – interfere with their – um-hm.
- MC: But they – ranchers held their own pretty good. (pauses) They had some difficulties, but (clock chiming) there wasn't any real outbreaks or anything like that or fights or they weren't very happy about having 'em take over but –
- VE: Do you know how they kept from, uh, losing all that water to the Los Angeles – project?
- MC: They didn't lose it all.
- VE: How did they keep from –
- MC: – Well, they –
- VE: – losing it?
- MC: – the va – the valley is still wet.
- VE: Uh-huh
- MC: There they'd get the water from all the mountains, you know? Do –
- VE: Um-hm. (pauses) Was it a, a court procedure they had to go through?
- MC: No. No, I don't think they did, I don't remember very good.
- VE: Would this have affected your ranch had it, uh –
- MC: No, we, we had our water from the, from the mountains instead of the river.
- VE: Oh, I see. (pauses) (clock ticking) Well, I'm just enjoying so much what you have to say.
- MC: (laughs)

³⁰ Metropolis in Southern California.

³¹ The Los Angeles Water Commission built an aqueduct to move water from the Owens Valley to Los Angeles in 1913.

- VE: And I just—I just, um, anything that, that you would like to talk about I'd love to hear.
- MC: Well, I don't know much—or what I di—what I didn't know, I've forgotten.
- BH: And her—her married life was so interesting because her husband³² was a builder and they would move to Mammoth, he would build in the summer—ask her about that—and back snowed in, he would move back to Bishop in the winter.
- VE: Oh, uh-huh.
- MC: We loved it.
- VE: What type of building did he do?
- MC: Any cabins and things for people up and around Mammoth.
- VE: And you lived up in that area—
- MC: —Um-hm.—
- VE: —too?—
- MC: —Yes.—
- VE: Oh.
- MC: Have a cabin up there.
- VE: Oh!
- MC: Had a cabin. I sold it (pauses) after he died, I, I, I never been back up there to live.
- BH: Virginia, there's a picture that Mr. Brown³³ painted my mother of the cabin.
- VE: Oh, that's lovely. Isn't that beautiful?
- SM: To this day grandma bakes all of their bread here.
- VE: Um-hm.
- SM: And, uh, she did that on a wood stove clear up until the time Mr. Chamberlain passed away.
- VE: Um-hm.
- BH: Stick your hand in the oven to see if the oven was hot enough for the bread (all laugh). We didn't have thermometers, heat the water on the tank in the back.
- MC: We loved it both of us, he did, and I did too. We just loved it.
- VE: Did he hunt while you were—
- MC: Hm?
- VE: —did he hunt and all when you were—
- MC: —Not very—
- VE: —living—
- MC: —much. No. he fished.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: He fished more than he hunted.

³² Edward Merrill Chamberlain (1877–1949), second husband of Mary Chamberlain and father of Vesta Bereneice “Bea” Hilton.

³³ Presumably a family friend.

VE: Um-hm. Did you bring supplies in when you went—

MC: —Oh yes.—

VE: —in to do the building?

MC: Mm.

VE: Uh-huh.

MC: And then there was a store up there in Mammoth and—but we'd us—usually took up what we wanted to use.

VE: Um-hm.

[00:40:09]

BH: Course years ago, they had to take a wagon, you know? It would take them two days to go from Bishop up to Mammoth. Then, of course, cars came in.

VE: Do you remember that?

MC: Um-hm.

VE: Do you remember cars and, and all the outcomes of them?

MC: Sure do. Used to go in a wagon and the, the road up over the Sherwin Hill,³⁴ you'd just jump off of one rock and go down another and get another rock and go—

VE: — (laughs)—

MC: —that way it was bad road for a long time but now it's pretty good road.

VE: Um-hm. Did you, um, have a car right after they—

MC: We had a car obviously.

VE: Um-hm. That would be quite a change from—

MC: —Yes. (laughs)—

VE: —driving, driving in a covered wagon—or a wagon and a, a car.

SM: Grandma's parents came in a covered wagon to California.

VE: Uh-huh.

SM: Did you ask her about that?

VE: Yes, uh—

MC: No, I don't know anything about that.

SM: Ah.

MC: I really don't. (pauses)

BH: Well, of course, it don't seem—

VE: Seem to me—

BH: —that they had a sprint start to cattle, you know, and riding them. They didn't take 'em in, in cars like they do now with trucks and all. But they had to have their early ride and drive them down over there.

VE: Um-hm.

MC: We had the—the cattle in the valley all winter, and in the spring we'd take 'em up to Mammoth, (pauses) and I loved that 'cause I got to ride my own.

VE: How long were those drives?

³⁴ Ridge in Mono County, California.

- MC: Well, we'd—sometimes, if we got an early start, they could drive up in a day—
- VE: —Um-hm.—
- MC: —from Bishop. But, uh, if we didn't, if, if it was, uh, an awful big herd of cattle, well, it took longer, you know? They're slow.
- VE: And you camped out when you were on those drives there?
- MC: You what?
- VE: You camped out when you were on those drives?
- MC: No.
- VE: No?
- BH: You did too camp out, mother.
- SM: No, she said, "on the drive."
- BH: Oh—well they'd, they'd get to Sherwin Hill and stay all night and then start up early in the morning.
- VE: Those are quite some experiences, my goodness. You must be quite a horse woman, too.
- MC: I loved it. Yes, I did, I, I used to ride a lot. And I liked it.
- SM: Did girls wear pants in those days, long pants?
- MC: I can't remember whether I ever wore pants or not.
- SM: They had long skirts, and it was so hard to wash everything and yeah—and so dusty, I imagine.
- MC: I don't remember whether I wore—
- BH: I don't remember even in my time whether I wore, (laughs) I can remember going out and getting a horse out of the pasture.
- MC: Yes, I do all that—
- BH: But I can't remember what we wore.
- MC: —I don't know whether I wore overalls or not, I can't remember.
- BH: I can't either.
- VE: In some of my readings I came across, uh, uh, some problems with the Indians as far as, uh, when they had illnesses that, that they wanted to kill their medicine men, do you remember anything—
- MC: —Um-hm.—
- VE: —about that?
- MC: No.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: Not a thing about that. The white people were always willing to help them any way they could.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: No they—we was, we was very, very friendly with the Indians. The Indians—we never, I don't think we ever had any trouble with any kind. They used to say that they'd steal, but I don't think we ever lost a thing from 'em.

- BH: Well, they had what they call their powwows³⁵ up there every year, and they would go out on the river and ride in the dust. See, I don't know why they would go way over there way, then they'd build fake willows and make this great big circle. And each family would make their, their, had their place around in this circle, and they were great to gamble, they gambled like it wasn't mother and sticks.
- MC: Um-hm. Sticks mostly.
- BH: And then they would have this Indian dance "au-wo-ona-motina"³⁶ and go over there, and we kids would go out there and dance with 'em and dust clear up to our ankles.
- VE: Do you remember those powwows?
- MC: Oh, yes.
- VE: Oh, I'd love to hear about those.
- MC: Well, I don't know anything I can tell you, only it were the, the—just as she said they'd circle and um—around, all the way around, you know? Like that. Have a kinda, a little "hu-hu-hu-hu" but, uh, we used to go and watch 'em.
- BH: Well, each family had their fire, right kinda to, to the end, wasn't it, where they were inside this willow until—of course it was just a kind of a windbreak really wasn't a—
- MC: —Yeah. —
- BH: —a big circle, you know, with the willows up this way. Then each family would be around this way and then their fire here. Then they'd dance in the center of this ring. (pauses)
- VE: Did, uh, did you—were you ever, um, around when maybe there was any kind of problems with the Indians?
- MC: No, that was before my time.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: No, they were very peaceable.
- VE: Were there any people in your community that didn't like the Indians?
- MC: I don't know of anybody.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: I don't know of anybody—I don't know of anybody that disliked 'em. They, they were very peaceable, you know? There, there was no trouble with the Indians at all.
- SM: Wasn't there an Indian that had that cute saying when you asked him where something was? He said "over down yonder," was is—
- MC: Oh yeah, "down yonder on the other side of Tag Hardin's needy sage brush." (all laugh) (pauses) No wh—we white kids all liked the Indians,

³⁵ Term for an Indigenous social gathering with religious or traditional sentiments.

³⁶ Presumably an Indian dance and song.

- (coughs) and those old *Mahalas* they were just as good to us as they could be. Especially after my mother died, they were awful good to us.
- VE: You said your washwoman, you went to visit her and, and what happened?
- MC: Well, she'd go out and have her baby and come back and wash – finish the wash.
- VE: Just like that?
- BH: They were never –
- VE: – No problem.
- BH: – they were never in the house. They would come in the mornings, and of course they had the – you know, wash on a washboard and a, and a tub. They'd take the water outside and mom would fix their, their food. And they ate, believe me. Instead of putting a coffee in a cup it would be a big bowl like that.
- VE: Um-hm.
- BH: And I don't know what mom used to fix 'em –
- MC: – (laughs) –
- BH: – but I remember that coffee though.
- VE: Did you get to eat any of the Indian food? What types?
- MC: No, I don't think – we had all the pine nuts, we'd get the pine nuts.
- VE: (laughs)
- MC: But, um, I don't, I don't think I ever ate any Indian food, but they ate a lot of our food –
- VE: – (laughs) –
- MC: – and enjoyed it. (laughs) No, we were very friendly with the Indians.
- VE: Do you remember any of the things they prepared? Or foods they prepared besides the pine nuts?
- MC: Why – uh, they cooked beans.
- VE: Beans?
- MC: Beans was one of their strong dishes. But oh, I don't know, with – they most always – white people would give them foods, you know?
- VE: Did they grow crops and things?
- MC: No. They weren't – they were camped out on the hillside usually, uh, not on the main, uh, ranch ground.
- VE: Well then, they didn't really live off the land, they worked more.
- MC: They worked and hunted and fished and things like that, you know? An awful lot and they worked for the white people all during the, the, uh, haying seasons and grain seasons and things like that. They all worked for the white people.
- VE: Did you ever see – Do the Paiutes do weaving and things like –
- MC: – Mm. –
- VE: – that? Did you –
- MC: – Yes. –
- VE: – see some of their work?

- MC: Oh, yes. The baskets and, and baby ba – uh, baby, uh, baskets, you know? And all that kinda stuff, they did.
- BH: Oh, show her that Papoose³⁷ basket that we got in there.
- MC: I expect she's seen them.
- VE: Oh no, I haven't.
- MC: Did you ever see them?
- VE: No. Did you ever get to do any of the weaving with them?
- MC: Oh, no.
- VE: No?
- MC: Um-hm. I never did any of it.
- VE: Where did they get their materials, do you remember?
- MC: The willows.
- VE: The willows?
- MC: Um-hm, yeah. There's a baby basket hanging up in there, dear.
- BH: Mm, I'll show it to her when she goes. Papoose.
- MC: Papoose basket.

[00:50:00]

- VE: (pauses) Did the mothers keep the children with them all the time when they worked? Or, or leave them somewhere? Or what did they do?
- MC: I don't know.
- BH: They used to bring them, 'cause I've got pictures where I played and made mud pies and things while the Indians was working.
- MC: (pauses) No, we were very fond of the Indians. Of course, we had the Paiute Indians, and they're different than some Indians, you know? Some Indians are dirty and all, but the Paiute Indians aren't that way.
- VE: Oh.
- MC: They, they tried to copy from the white people –
- VE: – Um-hm. –
- MC: – and all. Learned to do things from the white people.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: But there's some Indians tribes that are – (pauses) well, they're not like that at all, you know? And I – we never caught the Indians stealing from us or anything like that. Some of 'em, some Paiute tribes they do steal and all. (pauses) But um, it's um –
- VE: Were you ever around any other Indians than –
- MC: – No. –
- VE: – Paiutes?
- MC: No, um. Not to speak of, hardly. Now, the Paiute Indians and us was – were all one family –
- VE: – Um-hm. –

³⁷ Traditional Indigenous basket used to carry infants and young children.

- MC: – pretty near. We liked the Indians very much, and they all liked us. And, uh, they were very friendly with our people. So, I think it's a whole lot what you put out, whether you get it back or not.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: You know?
- VE: Then the white man really changed the Indians' way of life quite a bit, it sounds like.
- MC: Well, they tried to copy 'em –
- VE: – Uh-huh. –
- MC: – white people a lot, you know?
- VE: Do you remember what type of things they copied and did?
- MC: Well, I don't know. (pauses) Dressing mostly, you know, and things like that.
- VE: You never saw them wear their, their, their regular type –
- MC: I don't think –
- VE: – Indian clothes. –
- MC: – any of them where we lived had anything only – they dressed in a lot of white people's clothes, you know? And everything like that of course. They had moccasins³⁸ like, you know, made their own out of buckskin and things like that, but, yeah, they dressed – tried to copy the white people.
- VE: Where did they get their skins to make the moccasins and things?
- MC: Killed, uh, killed deer and things like that, you know –
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: – and animals that had good skins, they cut out their moccasins and sewed them and made them. Buckskin, you know, the deer skin they used an awful lot of that for making the moccasins out of. (pauses)
- VE: Did you ever watch them do any panning³⁹ or things like –
- MC: – No. –
- VE: – that?
- MC: No, I never happened to see them do any of that.
- VE: (pauses) When you went over to the Indian camps what did – what type of things did you do over there?
- MC: Oh, just chat with 'em and talk to 'em and watch 'em make their beadwork and things like that. And they were always so nice to us children, awful nice. We just didn't have bad Indians.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: They, they were the Paiutes, and the Paiutes are good Indians. (pauses) No, we were very fond of the Indians, (pauses) and they were awful good to my mother, helped her, and she was nice to them and that, you know, encouraged 'em to be nice, too, so. (pauses) No, I was only six years old

³⁸ Footwear typically made out of deerskin and other soft leather.

³⁹ Presumably panning or mining for gold.

- when my mother died, (pauses) and I was (pauses) the second child. I had three sisters, and a brother. And then my mother lost twin babies when she died. Course she was a long ways – quite a long ways from a doctor. I don't know if that would have saved her or not, wasn't to be. That's the way we have to look at it anyway: wasn't to be.
- VE: (pauses) That was a very hard thing for a child to –
- MC: – Um-hm. –
- VE: – go through. Um-hm.
- MC: Yes.
- VE: How do you think that affected your life afterwards?
- MC: I don't know, I really can't tell you. People were awful good to me. I never had any awful hardships –
- VE: – Um-hm. –
- MC: – even after she died because I had an aunt that was awful good to me, and the neighbors were awful nice to me. They, uh – and the people in Independence always seemed awful nice to the – to us kids. (pauses)
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: So I, I'm very grateful for getting along as well as I did.
- VE: And having such a full, rich life too.
- MC: Mm. Yeah. I had an awful nice husband. I sure hated to give him up, but I'm getting along. I have to live 'til I die. Ninety-four.
- VE: That's wonderful. That's just wonderful. When did he pass away?
- MC: In '49.
- VE: Um-hm. And how did he, how did he die?
- MC: Well, he just (pauses), I don't know what really hea – heart trouble mostly I think was the cause of his death. And then he was – we – he was up in that high altitude, and he worked on those big logs and things like that, building and all. I, think was just too much for him.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: But he was an awful good man, just an awful good man. I sure have been lonely without him.
- VE: He was a builder; did he do some logging too?
- MC: He did, uh, he worked with logs, cabins, and built an awful lot of buildings up in Mammo – around Mammoth, and he built – did building while he was in Bishop, too.
- VE: Um-hm.
- MC: (pauses) He was a good builder (pauses), and a good man.
- VE: Would you tell me about your journeys back and forth from Bishop and Mammoth when you had to leave and –
- MC: Well, we had two – well, hon', usually we have two loads in the spring, and um we drive the light rig and he'd have a load go up, but we left most of our stuff in the cabins and indoor (inaudible), you know?
- VE: Um-hm.

MC: So, we didn't have so much, but we managed.

VE: Well, were you leaving for the winter? Was that—

MC: —Yeah, we'd go up, we'd go up in the spring, in May usually, as soon as we could get in. And then we would stay there until we thought it was gettin' snow time, then we'd get out. But we both loved it, and we loved all our neighbors, but they, they were awful nice people.

VE: Um-hm.

MC: So, (pauses) we had lots of good neighbors.

VE: And when you went back to Bishop, did he build in Bishop, too?

MC: When, when, when he could. There wasn't so much building going on in Bishop as there was around Mammoth.

VE: Why is that?

MC: Well, I don't know. They, uh, they, um—Mammoth people would come in and build cabins and things like that, you know? Down in Bishop, it was pretty well built up.

VE: Um-hm. Um-hm.

MC: So, uh, he, uh, he never lacked for work or chanced for—and he was a good carpenter, good carpenter. (pauses) I have got to go to the bathroom.

VE: Oh, okay. (break in the audio) At this point, Mrs. Chamberlain felt too exhausted to continue the interview. But she promised to continue the interview at another time.

[01:00:03]

END OF INTERVIEW