INTERVIEW WITH MYRTLE HOLLOMAN

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A STORY OF EARLY SALTSPRING HISTORY

TRANSCRIBED BY AMY NEWMAN

Interviewer: Today we are talking to Mrs. Myrtle Holloman. Her maiden name is Wallace and she is now living on Saltspring Island. I am taping her here across from Wallace Island on Walker's Hook. It's April 18, 1977. Would you like to say a little bit about the manuscript which your mother wrote?

Myrtle: Well, mother had the idea. She said that she used to sit at her mother's knee and listen to her stories because the one thing about Sylvia Stark, my grandmother, was that she never became senile. Her mind was very very clear and it was quite a novelty to many people. She even had people coming from England and reporters interviewing her and they all marvelled at the clarity of her mind. Mother said she often listened to these stories-especially the early days of slavery and travel across country-with no thought of putting them into a manuscript. However, as time went on, she felt the family should know all of this, their early history and origin, so that gave her the idea of this manuscript. Before I came here, she had written, hand written, quite a bit of notes and whatnot and we had an old Underwood typewriter here. It was not a very good typewriter. That's why the manuscript has alot of errors. Anyway, I taught her to touch type so she was able to do it much faster. Then she became very interested in this project. In fact, she would amaze me. She would have her dinner here at six in the evening and then go immediately to the typewriter room and type steadily until one o'clock in the morning, night after night. At that age, I just wondered if her stamina would hold up. I didn't think I could do that myself. Then when she was about ninety-three, she felt she had done all she could do on it and that was it...

I think I should start off first by telling you that gold was discovered at Sutter's Creek in 1849 and that started thousands of fortune hunters coming to California.

This was the dawn of freedom for the Estuss family. Howard Estuss, my great grandfather, was a slave who worked for Tom Estuss. His wife, Hannah, was from the island of Madagascar. She and her three children, Sylvia, Agnes and Jackson, worked for a Mr. Leopold, a German baker who was in favor of the abolition movement. His wife was not in accord with her husband and thought they should conform to the Southern rules of handling slaves. Accordingly, these conditions made life very difficult for the Estuss family. Howard hoped that he could earn his family's freedom working in the rich gold fields of California and his chance came when his boss, Tom Estuss, was sending cattle to California. Howard went as a herder with a contract agreeing to give him his freedom papers upon receipt of one thousand dollars. It allowed him to earn the money mining gold in California. He sent the money back to Tom who received the money but refused to give Howard his freedom. Unwilling to give up, Howard made another one thousand dollars and sent it back directly to Charles Leopold. Tom Estuss still caused much trouble, but eventually had to release Howard's papers. In the meantime, Howard paid Mr. Leopole one thousand dollars each for Hannah and son Jackson and nine hundred dollars for Sylvia. Agnes had died while her father was in goldfields. So the family bought forty acres of land in Missouri and tried garden farming. Money was very scarce and when Sylvia's brother Jackson came home from the market, he told his mother that eggs had raised to ten cents a dozen. However, they did well selling vegetables, pigs, and chickens, but life here also became unbearable. The nightriders were going about beating and kidnapping colored people, terrorizing them, so my grandfather wanted to sell and leave at the first opportunity. That came when Charles Leopold was taking a large consignment of livestock to California.

Howard went as a herder, also his son Jackson. Hannah was the cook. It was the first day of April, 1851, when they left Missouri. They made quite a jolly start, making April fool jokes, etc, as they went along. Then they camped where there was good grazing for the cattle at Humboldt Creek. It had once been a campsite for the Indians. They met two white women, who as children had witnessed the slaying of their parents. A sister and a brother and themselves were captured by the Indians. In time, they were rescued. They were both married and still living in the same isolated district where stalked the ghosts and memories of that dark tragedy. Their story caused Sylvia and her mother apprehension for the future of the long trail that lay ahead, but in spite of the dangers during the journey, Sylvia and her brother found life on the great plains something new and thrilling. From the little prairie dogs barking and scampering at sight of them, to the stampeding of great herds of buffalo at sight of the caravan, Sylvia would gather the beautiful flowers while walking along. Sometimes, swarms of locusts darkened the sky and fell about the wagons and creeped inside the canvas, getting into the cooking utensils and other paraphenalia. Often, the only field they had was dried buffalo chips. They made their pancakes and bacon taste smoky, but they ate them with relish. Sometimes they were so parched for water, from a stream where the carcasses of dead animals lay, that it was hard for Sylvia's mother to get used to. She went farther up the stream, only to find more cow horns protruding from the water. One awful night on the journey, Sylvia could not forget seeing the ewes of the sheep, too heavy with young to travel, left behind only to be devoured by ferocious coyotes. She tried to scare them off by throwing stones at them, and at this she had to be careful of herself too, because it was very dangerous for her to take that chance. There was quite an uneasy feeling of the group travelling through this section of the country, so every

precaution was taken to safeguard the animals. At night, a cordon of wagons was placed around the camp and the men slept with their guns stacked close to hand, ready for any emergency. The first intimation they had of danger, was one night when Jackson, Sylvia's brother, was on guard. He was sitting out in the bright moonlight, gazing at the mounds and shadows. Then he said something told him to sit in the shade of a wagon. He had scarcely moved from his seat when an arrow whizzed past him and stuck fast in the ground where he had been sitting. Instantly, the alarm was given and every man grabbed his gun, but there was not a sound, not even the howl of a coyote. Fearing Indians might plan to raid the camp in the morning when the wagons were loaded and hitched, they left before dawn. Once they came to a spot for camping where there was plenty of grass for the animals. They camped very early to let the animals graze and they were making themselves comfortable, when someone put his ear to the ground to listen for sound. They heard sounds alright. Soon everyone heard hoofs coming. In less time than it takes to tell, they were surrounded by a large band of Indians, whooping and howling as they raced around the camp to make the cattle stampede, but the poor beasts were tired to run. Then they increased their howling, giving out terrible yells as they raced around the camp. Mr. Estuss became uneasy, as the men were preparing to put up a fight, but he was the only man who had his family with him. The head of the Indian band, could speak English. Howard Estuss talked with him and he was able to pacify them and they exchanged gifts and so they were able to go on their way. So they continued their journey with watchfulness and care and soon came upon eight men travelling on foot and they were a sorry spectacle, as their caravan had been raided by the Indians during their camp. In making off with their heavy loaded wagons, the Indians, in their haste, spilled a quantity of flour and that was all that was

left to these eight men and a few cooking utensils. One of the men had slit the leg of his pants up to the knees, and tied one end to hold the flour which they scooped up from the ground. They had travelled on this for three days and were very glad to meet up with the Leopold caravan, who shared their provisions with them. It was the first day of April, 1851, when they left Missouri. The wagon train reached Sacramento, California exactly six months later, less three days. After they finally got to California, they stopped at Plasserville, which was about sixty miles from the capital of Sacremento and there they moved into an empty miner's cabin. As soon as these miners found gold, they would just leave that area, including their cabins, leave with their gold and go on. So they moved in and were able to make quite a comfortable home there. Howard Estuss worked for one of the mining companies, panning gold and Sylvia, my grandmother, and her brother would pan gold in the deserted mines where they got just the gold dust, I suppose. They were able to sell it and made about one dollar a day. Incidentally, flour was selling for about fifteen dollars a barrel at this time...

Mr. Estuss decided to take up farming so he did vegetable farming and they did very well then, selling fruit and vegetables. Then it seemed that the legislature of California was deciding to make California a slave state because of pressure from white Southerners and so of course that made them very apprehensive about their future in California. They'd heard of what was New Caledonia then - instead of British Columbia - so they sent a delegation up to see Sir James Douglas - he was governor then - to see if they could be admitted to Canada...

When the group landed in Victoria, and had audience with Sir James Douglas, they asked permission to form a colony. He refused absolutely. He didn't like that idea at all and he told them to settle wherever they wished

to settle. He didn't wish them to form any small group or negro colony. However, he was very partial to these people because his wife was part negro, you see...

Interviewer : The investigative group of sixty-five people who went up to see this area, how do they tie in with your family?

Myrtle: Well, they were the original group of people who wanted to leave because of this legislation that was going to come up in California to make it a slave state. There were merchants, and some very well to do people, miners, farmers; it was a mixed group and they came back with a very favorable report and so a group of them got together to make the trip north. There were approximately six hundred people. The men travelled overland, driving the cattle and the women and children were put on board ship. They landed at Stillicum, Washington and waited there for the menfolk and cattle which was a month or more in coming in arriving. Then the group took a boat into Victoria and met the governor who admitted them to Canada. As British subjects, they were allowed to purchase land at so much an acre, a few shillings an acre. Some settled in the Saanich peninsula, and they did mixed farming there and then around 1860, they decided to move to Salt Spring Island and that's when they came through in a sailing ship and the cattle were lowered over into the water and swam to shore. The people climbed down rope ladders into two Indian canoes. There were two Indians - a man and his wife - who were manning the canoes. That is where they had an episode with the Indians where my grandmother thought she would never come out of it alive. They were seated on shore; she was with her two young children at that time. She had all of their possessions and her husband, Roy Stark was going into the settlement to get help to move all of this up to their cabin. While he was gone, (they were with a Hudson's Bay agent, Mr. McCauley), they saw a canoe coming laden with furs, with Indians who, when they saw this party on the beach, swerved from their right and turned right into shore. They were very hostile and one had a knife that he put to McCauley's throat and threatened him with

death and my grandmother, Sylvia, said she just sat there and prayed, hoping that they wouldn't do anything to her children, that they would be safe. In the meantime while this was going on, the Indians were going through all the possessions, turning everything over. The Indian wife slipped away in her canoe to get help from her camp, on one of the other islands.

Interviewer: This was the Indian who was friendly to you?

Myrtle: That's right. So another group came in their canoes and the first group who had stopped at the shore jumped back into their canoes and got away as quickly as they could, with the others following them. That's when the massacre happened in Ganges Harbour, the massacre which I think has been written about so many times and that was the result of that meeting...

Later, after the settling in the cabin on Saltspring Island, the settlers discovered that the work was very hard. They had to do everything by hand, such as cutting the path through the bushes, making the roads and so on. Lou Stark built several roads and in the meantime, Giles Curtis, a friend of the family living there, was murdered by Indians so the Estuss family decided that they had better move to Fruitvale in Ganges harbour. That's where my mother was born. They stayed there for quite some time. However, Lou Stark was rather adventurous and he decided he'd go to another farm on Vancouver Island. Part of the family went with him when he left. My uncle was left to take care of the farm at Fruitvale. Lou and his group went up to Nanaimo and then they went and settled on a farm outside of Nanaimo. Incidentally, on the farm on Vancouver Island, people who learned that there were descendants of Stark living here on Saltspring, came over and found us here and said that they still got apples from what they called the "Stark Tree", beautiful apples from the tree that Lou Stark had planted so long ago. In fact, they brought some of the apples over for us. When I happened to have this trip there in 1967, they showed me also Stark's Crossing, named after Louis Stark. The family came back eventually and settled on

the farm where the Clayburns are now, my oldest sister's family. That was the fourth farm they settled on and worked on...

My uncle Rowis was given permission by the government, because of their poverty state here on the island, to shoot deer all year round, outside of the hunting season. I recall many times we visited as children when he would give us part of some venison to take down to neighbors and that's when we were very apprehensive as we travelled along the road, afraid of animals, always, you know! Of course, our cousins used to laugh at us for this since they were all born here on the island. Their grandmother was mother's first cousin. That's what the relationship is with the Woods family.

Interviewer: How did your family, your pioneering relatives, make their living on the land?

Myrtle: They lived on the land because they grew their own wheat, ground it, raised sheep and made their clothing from wool by spinning their sheep's wool on an old spinning wheel. Then the produce was sent to market by ships. They sold eggs among other things. Even in the early years that I visited Sylvia Stark, my grandmother, she was still shipping eggs off to Victoria. They sold fruit too, because they had alot of fruit trees...

The orchards gradually just failed because, after the first World War, the costs were too high for shipping off the island and it wasn't profitable at all. People just left fruit on the trees. The apples would fall, fruit was left on the gound...

I want to elaborate a little more on the Stark family. I believe I should tell you a bit more about Louis Stark. He was born is Louisville, Kentucky and he never knew his own age but he remembered seeing the stars fall in 1833. No doubt he was at the discerning age, for he had a very clear discription of the occurrence. He said he saw people running from their homes, panic-stricken, and screaming and praying. One old woman was perched on the fence shouting that the Judgement Day had come. The stars were falling all around them like snow. But Louis just

laughed at their strange antics and he saw only the humorous side of the happening. His earliest recollections were wearing a one piece garment of coarse, homespun cloth and that was his only covering. It served, too, for a sleeping gown and the children had a dirt floor and slept on old mattresses with rags for a covering. Their dinner was from a large pot which was placed in the centre of one big room and they had no seats. All they had was a spoon and piece of cornbread and they all ate from that one pot of stew. In spite of all these handicaps, Louis grew up to be quite a strong man. He learned how to graft fruit trees, as his father kept a nursery and Louis loved grafting trees. He also learned the trade of a barber and as a young man, he travelled on the boats of the Mississippi, as a barber. He recalled shaving Jesse James, the notorious outlaw, at one time, also having dinner with him on the boat. During the gold rush, Louis went to California. If he was a free man, his free papers could not be trusted, for he had to pass as a Spaniard to hide his identity. He came through the Panama route as hundreds of people came that same way, from every walk of life, trekking through the mud and the heat of the Ismus bound for the California goldfields. The stagecoach had broken down and the crowd had to continue the journey on foot. The heat was so intense and travel so difficult, that topcoats and various other articles of clothing were cast off and left strewn along the highway. There were even shoes left sticking in the mud, in their haste to catch the last boat bound for San Francisco. But the Mexicans, who carried baggage, bundles and even babies for they were immigrants, travelled with apparent ease ir shorts. A Jewish woman collapsed by the roadside, unable to go any farther. She was following a Mexican who was carrying her baby and he was well out of sight, much to the distress of the Jewish mother. So Louis Stark, seeing the woman's plight, kindly carried her the remainder of the journey. It was a heavy load but Stark was young and strong and the woman was very grateful for the timely lift. They

found the boat waiting for them and kind passengers were taking care of the woman's baby. Like most of the new immigrants, Stark tried goldmining. This took him often to nearby town of Plasserville, nicknamed Hangtown, because of the frequent hangings which took place there. Plasserville was they exchanged maiden gold for cash. .. Now I am going to refer back to the Estuss family. Howard Estuss and his wife Hannah, had three children, Sylvia, my grandmother, her older sister, Agnes, and a son, Jackson. When they went to California, Sylvia married Louis Stark and they had seven children. One of them was my mother, Marie. Mother married Joseph Wallace, my father, and we were all born in Vancouver, B.C. There were five children of that union. Ultimately, each one left: one to Montreal, another to Chicago, and the other two to California My youngest brother had died in 1908 in the influenza epidemic at the age of sixteen. Then, to get back to Saltspring, each one of us came back here to retire, which seems strange. The youngest sister came back from Montreal, I came back from Chicago and Oscar and Ethel, my oldest brother and sister, came back from California. Of course, now we are all living here on Saltspring Island. The Clayburns are the only ones living on the old homestead, along with Oscar who is living on Wallace's original property...