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SBOH-3, Margit Sands
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Interview with Margit Sands 3-2-2006

Robyn: So let's start with factual stuff. Where were you born?

Margit: Yuba City.

Robyn: You lived where your folks live now in Yuba City?

Margit: Yeah, and they moved into their house just before I was born.

Robyn: So how long has it been since anybody's lived at the ranch (in the Sutter Buttes)?

Margit: I'm not sure when they stopped going up there and living the four or five months. I would say the '20s or maybe... I'm not sure if they went on into the '30s.

Robyn: Okay. Because there's no electricity and – there must be a well or something?

Margit: There's a spring, a historic spring. My parents have put in two wells that do not produce a whole lot of water, but they do produce more than the spring when you get to the end of summer. And we have a generator.

Robyn: So you grew up going up there?

Margit: Not as much as I do now because of the road. It took an hour to go from the base up to our ranch. The trucks used to have what they called compound low – there was low and then there was another low-low, so about half of the way was going in that real crawly, low gear.

Robyn: Were all the gates there then?

Margit: The one on the long hill where the cattle guard is – that was not there.

Robyn: It took an hour because the cars were so slow or because the road was so bad.

Margit: The road was so bad. Because, you know what we call the long hill was cobbled. So it was just going from rock to rock basically. And it wasn't a real good cobbling job.

Robyn: So when did it get fixed?

Margit: In the '60s. Mid-60s. Because my folks started doing it and then that's when the power lines came in. And so then they did the rest of it. So that was the benefit of having the power lines in, although I'd just as soon not. (laughing) They're an eyesore.

Robyn: So how much did you go in when you were a kid? How often?

Margit: Just a few times a year.

Robyn: Didn't you have cattle in there?

Margit: Had cattle in there. My grandfather would have – instead of selling our calves when we'd take them off the cows, we would keep them a whole nother year. And so they were two-year-olds when we sold them. And so we would take two drives of cattle into the Buttes in the fall. We'd take one earlier fall. I guess we'd be taking, I don't know – I was young then – and we'd take probably the steers up there then. Because I can remember driving them in December, you know, foggy, cold, and sitting on a horse, you don't move and so it just eats through you, and taking them up in December after they'd had calves. And then we'd bring everything out sometime in May, depending on the year.

Robyn: And where are you bringing them from?

Margit: Okay, you know Sutter, and you know Highway 20? We're south of Highway 20, and it's just on the east side of the bypass. That was my grandfather's land, and now, since his passing, a big chunk of that went to my cousin, who still lives there. And then my folks had bought some ground. And we still use that land.

Robyn: So why did you keep the calves for two years?

Margit: That was just a way of marketing, because when we sold them at two-years-old, then they would go basically right to the butchers. There would not be the feedlot step.

Robyn: And so you made more money that way?

Margit: I don't know that they made more money or not.

Robyn: Do you still do that?

Margit: No. We sell them when we take them off the cows at 6, 7 months age. Then they go to the feedlots for a year at least.

Robyn: And how many times a year do cows calf?

Margit: Once.

Robyn: And they're doing that right now?

Margit: Uh-huh.

Robyn: Aren't they up in the Buttes right now?

Margit: Ours are. My cousin's are down below. I have also our little heifers that we just weaned that are less – well, they're about a year old now.

Robyn: And when will you move them?

Margit: Well, it's funny. The cows in the Buttes will come down in, we start first of May we'll bring some down, and then by the end of May we usually have them all down, and we take that little group of heifers that's down now, they get to go spend the summer up in the Buttes.

Robyn: Why do they go up to the Buttes?

Margit: Just to keep them away from any other bull because we breed them to longhorns so that they're easy calving. So we don't have to go out and pull calves.

Robyn: And there's enough water and it's not too hot?

Margit: The heat's about the same. In a way it's – you don't have the humidity up there. But it doesn't cool off at night because the rocks hold the heat.

Robyn: But apparently they're okay. So you breed them to longhorns, is that what you said?

Margit: Mm-hmm.

Robyn: And that's easier calving?

Margit: Yeah, because they're just little skinny things. (laughing)

Robyn: So how much of the cattle ranching part were you involved in growing up?

Margit: If I could get on the horse, I was there. I just begged to be on the horse and be out there working with the cows.

Robyn: You have siblings, right?

Margit: Yes, I have two brothers.

Robyn: And were they involved?

Margit: Yeah, growing up they were both involved. And my oldest brother has more of an affinity towards the cattle. Of course, he lives in Seattle now, but when he comes down lots of times he'll come and ride with me. And my other brother is mechanical. He took after my father with the orchards and stuff.

Robyn: But apparently the land is going to you, because you're still here and you're still working it.

Margit: Yeah, I have the desire to keep the cattle and the love for the Buttes. I mean, my brothers both have a love for it, but I think I have a deeper...

Robyn: So talk about that a little more.

Margit: My love for the Buttes? Well, it's interesting. As a child, that was just my backyard. That was – I didn't know how special they were until I got older. And especially Walt Anderson kind of – I really realized how special they were, that they're unusual.

Robyn: How long ago did you meet Walt?

Margit: In '79. He started in '76, and in '79 he started coming on our property. And I was kind of surprised. My folks said, "There's someone leading hikes on our place." I just went, "Oh." I mean, I didn't have too much opinion one way or the other. And then he was there all spring long, never saw him, never met him, and my folks were going on Alaska trip with a group that he was leading, and so I tagged along at the last minute. And that's where I met him. I met him in Seattle for the first time. (laughing)

Robyn: So your parents were still very active.

Margit: Yeah, up until, well, it's just been the last two years that my mother really has backed off of coming out and really doing much with the cows.

Robyn: She's like 94, right?

Margit: She'll be 94 in June.

Robyn: That's legitimate. I think after 90 you can stop running cattle.

Margit: It's funny. I've had friends who have gotten hurt on the horses, so I've run out of some of my cowboy friends to help tag the cows this year, and she says, "Oh, I wish I could come help you."

Robyn: Dorothy works with you. And do you have other – your daughter was working with you?

Margit: Yeah. With her health, it's been the last two years she really hasn't been out. She's been recovering and she's pregnant again.

Robyn: And is she interested in working that land eventually?

Margit: I don't think she really will work cattle. She has a very deep appreciate for it, so I feel very comfortable that she'll take care of it. I would imagine that she would lease it out. Unless I have a cowboy granddaughter coming. (laughing)

Robyn: Well, that leads me into some of my other questions. Your land doesn't have a conservation easement on it, right?

Margit: No.

Robyn: You're obviously very involved with Middle Mountain, so clearly you've thought about this. Are you planning on putting one on there?

Margit: Yeah, I think eventually, when it's actually mine. Because my parents being in their 90s, they don't need anymore turmoil.

Robyn: Right, it's still in their name. And do you feel like you don't have any hesitancy about doing that?

Margit: No. I know I need to be very careful in making the agreement so it's livable for everybody, both sides concerned.

Robyn: But you've been involved in – actually I guess there's a conservation easement study session the board is doing coming up?

Margit: And I've gone to quite a few workshops.

Robyn: So you know what you're getting into. What do you think about landowners and conservation easements?

Margit: You mean whether they should or shouldn't?

Robyn: Yeah. I mean, now there's this whole new landowner, which is the state parks. And that land – no matter how you feel about state government, that land is now preserved. Then, that's always going to be a concern, I would think, if people don't have easements, about whether or not the land is going to be preserved.

Margit: Well, I hope that more landowners will, as things start happening for conservation easements, that more will go on because that way the land is protected from development, but yet it's still being worked. And I think there's a lot to be said about having it grazed rather than ungrazed because of the fire danger. And they've done studies that show that a lot of Nature Conservancy things – they've gone back to, "Okay, we want grazing in there" because it's beneficial to the native plants. They're finding that that's true.

Robyn: What do you think about state parks now since they obviously don't have anybody grazing their land?

Margit: Well, I wish they would. I mean, there are some places, some state parks that they do allow it. And they need to have it very limited so it's not overgrazed, because it's historically been overgrazed. It's nice because I don't have cows coming into our place all the time, because it's overgrazed over there.

Robyn: Was it being grazed before state parks bought it?

Margit: Yes. They had leasees.

Robyn: Hammons owned it, right?

Margit: Yes, Hammons and Hughes. And they leased it out. It's been leased to several different people through the last 10, 15 years.

Robyn: Do they still live around here?

Margit: Yeah, they're Gridley people, Hughes and Hammons both.

Robyn: Did you have any feelings about the fact that they sold it to state parks?

Margit: Well, a little bit because there's still a concern that if they open it up to just open public use, people are going to come across the fence. But the way the parks are handling it now with the guided access, it's just fine.

Robyn: You share a pretty long fence line with them.

Margit: Yeah, we share a fence line.

Robyn: So, obviously you don't want to see it developed. Do you think it would be better for it to stay in private hands and have conservation easements on it?

Margit: I think I would like to see it stay in private hands with easements on them. It's better to have it not be developed anyway it will happen.

Robyn: But obviously the Buttes have been managed pretty well for the most part.

Margit: Yeah. For the most part, yeah.

Robyn: So, growing up you went up as much as you could. As much as you could on horseback.

Margit: Yeah, well, when we'd go up in the spring to bring the cattle out, we'd take the horses to the shepherd shack where the trailer is when you go in. We'd unload the horses and there and then we'd ride them the rest of the way up. And it was funny because we'd be going up the long hill, and the horses would be going just about as fast as the vehicles. (laughing) And we'd go up, it was usually after school, like on a Friday, and we'd gather all the cattle into the corrals there. And I can remember when I was little it was getting pretty dark and we were still out trying to bring in the rest of them, and I was afraid I was going to get lost, and my mother kept saying, "Well, the horse knows the way home." (laughing) And it's so true; they know how to get home. To me that was so exciting because we'd go up and round them up, and then we'd get up before dawn. And we'd have them headed down the hill at dawn, out of the corrals. And we'd get down to the lower ranch, usually somewhere around one o'clock, and then we'd just put them in the corral, go and eat lunch, and then we'd come out and then we'd sort them to go into the different bunches. Because there was one, two, at least three different places that we'd be putting them into pasture down there. So they'd have to be

sorted. And of course they have calves, and so we'd have to pair them up too, with their mothers and babies.

Robyn: Don't the mothers usually stay right next to the – I mean the babies stay right next to the mothers?

Margit: Not when – see, by that time of year the calves are getting bigger, so they don't pay quite as much attention.

Robyn: And they're not nursing anymore?

Margit: Well, they're still nursing, but just not as often.

Robyn: So you'd separate the steers from the heifers—

Margit: Yeah, we'd separate the steers out, and then they would go to market then shortly after we brought them down.

Robyn: And what kind of cattle? You said that you would mate the—

Margit: The longhorn? My grandfather had what he called milking short horns, which are basically a red cow, or they could be a roan, which is the white flecks through it. And that's the one that has come through; some of those cows still have quite a bit of milk. But now we use short horn and hereford cross. So some of them are all red and –

Robyn: But milking is just the term; you don't have dairy cattle?

Margit: My grandfather used it as a dairy. Yeah, he had a dairy string—a small group of cows to milk.

Robyn: But you don't have them anymore?

Margit: No.

Robyn: So what you run now is just beef.

Margit: Beef cattle, yeah. And then the big thing was in '55 when we had the flood, he still had a string of dairy cows. I'm not sure how many, but it was 10, 12, something like that, and so we had to take all of the cows up to the Buttes because the lower ranch flooded. My mother, who had not milked – she was a housewife, and she didn't go out and milk everyday. Down there they had mechanical machines to milk them. Got them up in the Buttes and they had to do it all by hand. (laughing) Twice a day. And the first night it was dark by the time we got up there, and they finally told us kids to go ahead and go to the house because we were tired. And they still had to get in those cows and milk them at night. And it was funny – the house hadn't been lived in for quite a few years at that time, and my brother and my mother and myself slept in one double bed. The first night that was just fine; that was wonderful. The second night, well, that bed was getting kind of small. And

the third night it was awful. (laughing) And because the house hadn't been slept in, lived in, it just hadn't been lived in, and it was Christmas... it broke on the 24th I think, so it was Christmas Day, and my cousin came up through this road and the muck that he got through, and he brought Christmas presents. So we each had a Christmas present. So I got up and opened my Christmas present; then I went back to bed, and I kind of had the covers back, and here was this lizard. So I started yelling, "I have a lizard in my bed!" (laughing)

Robyn: That was sweet of your cousin to do that.

Margit: He had brought my grandmother up, and she was this real, kind of naïve and not worldly lady, and she didn't like to go fast in cars and stuff. And coming through some of that, because it was so wet, the car was just fishtailing all the way through this mucky muck. And he got her all the way through up to the house.

Robyn: So '55 there was a flood. What other floods...

Margit: Well, '55 it broke in Yuba City on the west side of the levee, and then I think it was '86 or '87 it broke over on the Marysville, going south into Linda and Olivehurst. Then again in '97 it broke there too. Then it broke just across from the lower ranch on the other side, it broke over on the one that went around Meridian and they built the wall, the levee to save Meridian.

Robyn: So, have you gotten flooded here in Gridley?

Margit: No, but we were evacuated in '97.

Robyn: To where?

Margit: Well, we went to the Buttes.

Robyn: I've always kind of wondered about that. When this area, or any place around the Buttes floods, do people go up into the Buttes, or... I mean, my understanding is before the '70s there weren't as many problems with trespassers. It's not that people didn't go on the land, but they weren't abusive.

Margit: It was in the '60s when they closed up the Buttes, because there had been arson, and there had been trespassers that didn't respect closing gates and the animals would get out. And they would just vandalize.

Robyn: So, before that, like in the flood in the '50s, did people – when it flooded did people go up into the Buttes or did they just leave the area completely?

Margit: They would leave the area, and then also they would go – a lot of people went into Sutter, which was higher.

Robyn: Right. I forget there's close by places that are even higher.

Margit: Yeah, you can go to Chico and that would be safe too.

Robyn: When you say they closed the Buttes, what does that mean?

Margit: They actually had air patrol and car patrol for a few years, about 5 years I think. Because there was an arsonist that was just setting fires and setting fires.

Robyn: How could you set a fire and have it not just take down the whole Buttes?

Margit: Well, they burned a lot of it, because the back part of our property – it started at Pass Road area and came clear over to our property.

Robyn: But your house didn't burn down.

Margit: No, it was in the back towards Hough Canyon. That was all burned. You know the little road that goes back in there? On the south side of the road, it was just completely burned out. It's hard to believe now, but that was like '64 or so when that happened.

Robyn: It is. Because those trees, I mean, they just look like they've been there forever. That's pretty amazing. Did they ever catch whoever did it?

Margit: I don't know if they ever really... they had suspicions, but I don't know if they ever really caught the person.

Robyn: That's too bad. And when you say there were patrols, you just mean like local police?

Margit: And they had – it was like civil patrols too. And then they had an airplane that kept flying over.

Robyn: Civil patrols meaning from the landowners in the Buttes or the whole city?

Margit: I don't know for sure. I don't remember.

Robyn: Because that's something that I've wondered about, is how local people respond to the Buttes. Now, obviously, if you look at the people on the board, they're local people and they obviously have a response to the Buttes, but just in general—like if you look at the hikes, most of the people aren't local. So I've kind of wondered...

Margit: Well, say when they wanted to build the condos around the golf course? I mean, that got the community up in arms. That was voted down 70-something percent.

Robyn: So people care about—even if they don't go into them. Actually, that's what Karen said, that they've always been a landmark for her.

Margit: Yeah, a sense of home. Well, you wonder now with so many more people coming in from out of the area what their feelings are.

Robyn: That would be interesting to find out. So, how much interaction did you have with other landowners? Well, now and when you were younger?

Margit: There's never been a whole lot. You know, it hasn't been socializing and stuff. Because I can remember back, the McPherrins and the Kellogs, they were well acquainted with—our families were well-acquainted with each other. McPherrins not so much social, but the Kellogs we'd see more. But the McPherrins just because we go through their property, we've had contact all the time. And there's kind of been a—I think it was back in my grandfather's time—there's been an agreement. The McPherrins do the fence lines, we do the road. So, the fence line between us, they take care of it.

Robyn: That's always just been like a verbal agreement?

Margit: Yeah, it's verbal.

Robyn: I remember when we went up into Brockman Canyon, you stopped and you and Pete were talking to Manuel for awhile. So, you don't socialize, but obviously you've known these people for awhile?

Margit: Well, I'd never really talked to Manuel before. And so I was basically introducing myself and telling him that I was a landowner. And so he knew my cousin who has the land down below now, and so that was another little connection.

Robyn: I guess I just assumed that the larger landowners that have been around for awhile, they would know each other.

Margit: Well, like Larry Smith, I have his phone number because lots of time I'll have a cow of his or he'll have a cow of ours. So there's contact, but it's not necessarily social.

Robyn: So, I guess there's the business contact because of the cattle or the roads. We tend to talk about "the landowners" as being this lump group.

Margit: Yeah, and it's not a cohesive group. I mean, in a way we are because we all have the Buttes in common, but it's not like we know each other very well.

Robyn: Well, and obviously your interests are different, because there are some people that don't mind developing. Although I wonder if those are people who actually live in the Buttes or live near it.

Margit: I don't know some of them. One of them—the first one I got so upset with—they live there, but they weren't old family there.

Robyn: And you got upset because they developed?

Margit: Because they divided and developed, yeah, sold it off to development.

Robyn: Because I know, like the area at West Butte and Pass Road where those couple houses are, that was a Tarke.

Margit: Yeah, and that had something to do with a divorce I think. Yeah, and actually the landowners' dinners—I'm getting acquainted with more landowners because of that.

Robyn: The north side or the northwest area – is that – I know the missile silos are up there. Well, I guess along the north it's the Shaeffers, Mary Spilman Crane. Is there anybody else along there that's been there for awhile? Do you know those people?

Margit: No. Let's see Justisons, which is now Bennie Ford, they've been there for a long time. And Powell. They don't go too far into the interior. I know Justisons because we have neighboring fence line.

Robyn: How many people do you share a fence line with?

Margit: Justisons, which is Bennie Ford, the state park, Marty, Kelloggs, which is now Charlie Roberts, and Larry Smith, and McPherrins.

Robyn: Charlie Roberts. His land is south isn't it?

Margit: (affirmative) If you go up Old Man you'd look right down on it.

Robyn: How many acres does your family have?

Margit: It's just under 1200.

Robyn: And it's completely landlocked. So if parks got an easement through whatever land they get an easement through to get to their land, would that affect your land? Would that easement ever go all the way through to your land?

Margit: Probably not.

Robyn: I ask that because of something on Marty's land about having to open up an old road if they put those houses in next to him and West Butte Road floods.

Margit: There is – you can see a road that goes down from ours to Peace Valley.

Robyn: How long has it been since that's been used?

Margit: As far as – in my memory it has never really been used. They have tried to keep it up so that they can get to the back end of their property.

Robyn: Once you became a teenager, you were in high school...

Margit: That's when we started spending more time up there because that's when the roads got fixed. So we started having—we'd go up there at Halloween with a group of people, and at Easter, another time with a whole group of people. Friends and family, mostly family friends. I had a birthday slumber party up there one time when I was in high school. It was very cold, because someone spilled a glass of water on the floor and in the morning it was ice. (laughing) Really cold.

Robyn: There must be a wood stove or something.

Margit: Yeah, there's two of them.

Robyn: So you were spending more time up there because you could get in then. Did you ever leave? Did you go to college?

Margit: I went to Chico, but yes. Not really leaving. I'd usually come home on the weekends, most of the time. I've always been within a half-hour of the Buttes. Chico was a little bit longer than a half-hour.

Robyn: So when you were in high school and you were going up there a little more, were you running cattle? Or did you just go up and go hike?

Margit: Well, we started at that time to change how we used the Buttes with the cattle because then we stopped keeping the steers until their second year to sell them. So we started calving up there and we were making sure that the calves came in the spring rather than just all year long, which is always a big joke with cattlemen. So then you'd have to go up, like we do now, you'd have to go up and check them a lot more when they're calving, because some of them have trouble calving or something.

Robyn: Can they usually do it themselves?

Margit: Usually.

Robyn: So you'll just go up there and there'll be a new calf?

Margit: Yeah.

Robyn: When's calving season?

Margit: We start in February and—the last two weeks in February are just like calf after calf after calf—and then into, through most of March. And then it gets—you have the ones that didn't get bred in time, that just didn't take or something.

Robyn: And you breed them, so you have control over who's coming when?

Margit: Yeah, so right now the bulls are isolated from the cows, because as soon as they have their calves, in about two weeks they could cycle back in to get bred.

Robyn: And you don't want that.

Margit: Don't want that. We want them to start coming in February. We don't want them in December and January when it's so yucky, rainy. I mean, it's going to be rainy now, but it won't be as cold.

Robyn: So that was when you started, when you were a teenager, that was when you changed—did your grandfather pass then?

Margit: I was in college when he died.

Robyn: But had he stopped working up there as much? Or did he just decide to start doing it differently?

Margit: Yeah, because my cousin actually lived with my grandparents. My grandparents basically raised her. So she continued to stay there after she went to vet school. So she came back and stayed there.

Robyn: She's a vet?

Margit: The first woman out of Davis.

Robyn: Really? What's her name?

Margit: Loretta Dean. So she just stayed and gradually took over more and more.

Robyn: She's a practicing vet now? She doesn't still do any cattle?

Margit: Yeah, she does. She's been having a horrible time this past week. I've been down there quite a bit.

Robyn: She has separate cattle from yours?

Margit: Yeah.

Robyn: She's having trouble calving?

Margit: Well, yeah, I had to go help pull a calf. Now she's getting crippled up, so I do the physical... So I had to pull a calf. That sort of started the whole thing. Then she had a cow that had twins, and so she needed to get them in and isolated so the cow wouldn't abandon one because they're not used to having twins. They'll walk off; they'll take one and just go off. They have their calf! So you kind of have to force them to take care of both of them.

Robyn: They're not very bright.

Margit: And then she had a cow that broke into the hay manger, which is a cement trough, rounded trough, and so she couldn't stand up. So she was down, and we pulled her, wrenched her out of the trough. And then she couldn't get up. So yesterday we put her down and did a cesarean and got the calf. And we have the calf out here, which you'll see because we'll have to feed it before we go out to dinner.

Robyn: So then you put the cow down?

Margit: Yeah. We shot her.

Robyn: Before or after you did the c-section?

Margit: You shoot her, you have two minutes to get the calf out. So you shoot her and then you just take the knife and slit her belly open and—

Robyn: And yank the thing out. Why do you have two minutes?

Margit: Because her heart stops beating and so the blood supply to the calf will stop.

Robyn: I wonder how that is with humans.

Margit: It's probably about the same, because we have the same gestation period. And I think that probably makes some similarities.

Robyn: That must have been pretty intense.

Margit: Yeah, it was.

Robyn: Have you had to do that a lot?

Margit: We have; we've done it before. We had one that they call prolapsed. And so we knew that she wouldn't be able to birth the calf correctly. And so we actually butchered her. We were in control; it didn't have to be an emergency—right now, has to be done. So we actually had the butcher, which is our neighbor, and so he shot her. That's the first time I've seen him do it. And then just last year, she had a cow that's what they call cancer-eye, and so she was just waiting long enough for she thought that the cow would have a viable calf. And I had a cow lose a calf up in the Buttes. And so she said, okay, we'll get Bernie and we'll butcher her and you can get the calf.

Robyn: And then you take the calf and put it with that cow who's ready to nurse?

Margit: Yeah.

Robyn: What happens normally? Like if you hadn't had that cow, what happens with that calf?

Margit: Well, it wouldn't survive because it needs to have the milk.

Robyn: So, do you have cows out here? (referring to the barn at the house)

Margit: No, we just have the calf and a horse. My retired horse.

Robyn: And who is the calf nursing off of?

Margit: We're bottle feeding it.

Robyn: So you're milking another cow?

Margit: No, I buy powdered milk. It just happens—right now, today, I'll give her colostrum again, which is the first cows' milk. That was milked from a cow and has been frozen. So we have to thaw it out and warm it up so that it gets the antibodies.

Robyn: So you said something about this cow being prolapsed. What is that?

Margit: The uterus is starting to come out to the exterior, is being pushed out.

Robyn: I still have this imagine of shooting this cow and slitting it open and pulling this calf out.

Margit: It was fun to see the calf because it was wiggling when it was still inside the sack. You could see it moving, and my cousin said, Slit it open! Hurry up! It's moving! It wants out!

Robyn: And then you take it out and put it in warm blankets...

Margit: I took some towels and rubbed it down.

Robyn: The mother would probably lick it? And how quickly do they stand up?

Margit: Usually they're standing up within an hour or less.

Robyn: Like a horse.

Margit: But see this calf, since it was probably like a month early, it was this morning before it actually got up. So we put a stomach tube down and gave it some colostrum yesterday so it would have nourishment. So this morning I tried to get it to nurse the bottle when it was still laying down, so I kept saying, Get up. So it kept struggling like a newborn calf trying to get up, flop around. Get up a little bit and flop down. And then finally when she get steady up on her feet, I offered the bottle to her again – she took it. And I thought, That's pretty amazing. She has to have that being upright.

<interruption by discussion with husband regarding preparing the colostrum>

Robyn: Is calf-starter just something you can buy?

Margit: Yeah, you can buy it. Calf replacement milk.

Robyn: It sounds like she's going to be healthy.

Margit: Yeah, she looks, all indications are good.

Robyn: How often have you had to deal with preemies?

Margit: Not very often.

Robyn: They don't have preemies very often?

Margit: No, my cousin had two this year that were—they were all formed and they got up and were able to nurse, but they were tiny. They were like a good month before they should have been born.

Robyn: But they usually live?

Margit: Well, she watched them carefully and made sure that they got up and nursed the mother.

<end of side one of tape>

Margit: I was job sharing. Started out with two days in the middle of the week so I could go out and check cows, when they're calving especially, and take them to market in the fall.

Robyn: What about all the years before that?

Margit: My mother was still active.

Robyn: Because teaching takes a lot of time. People don't realize how much you all do.

Margit: Well, this is funny. I go over to test and it's just like, Oh, I'm done. I can go home. I don't have to take anything home. All those years of lugging stuff home every night.

Robyn: And you were an elementary school teacher?

Margit: Yeah.

Robyn: So between the time you came back from college—did you graduate from college?

Margit: Yeah. With just a BA and then I got my teaching credential.

Robyn: So from the time you came back to this area from Chico to the time you started job sharing, all those years that you were teaching, getting married, having a kid—how active were you with the cattle.

Margit: Every weekend. Lots of times it was just one day, but sometimes it was both days during the weekend. Yeah, when Pete and I first got married, it was before we used longhorn bulls, and so

calving time then—my parents would stay up there during the week; we'd come stay on the weekend, because we were pulling calves like crazy.

Robyn: Because they're too big to get out, and the longhorns make them skinny. Does it affect how they are in terms of being able to sell them? Do they eventually get bigger?

Margit: The longhorns? Yeah, you don't usually get quite as good a price. But it's worth it. And you don't lose them. Very rarely do you have a dead calf.

Robyn: So when you—when a male calf is born, do you call it a bull yet?

Margit: A bull calf.

Robyn: How do you determine whether it's going to be a steer or a bull?

Margit: All of ours get to be steers. Because we go and buy our bulls so that we have new blood.

Robyn: And then what about the cows? How do you determine if they're going to be heifers or cows?

Margit: Well, the term heifer is just an age thing.

Robyn: I thought a heifer meant a female that wasn't going to be calved?

Margit: *Hasn't* calved. A heifer has not calved.

Robyn: Do you calf all cows?

Margit: If you keep them you want to have them calved. So our heifers will turn into cows because they're—usually you talk about heifers as being younger.

Robyn: And how old do they have to be in order to calf?

Margit: We do it at two years.

Robyn: Do you keep all of your heifers?

Margit: No.

Robyn: So you sell some and you keep some. So somebody could get them and decide not to calf them and just use them as beef?

Margit: Yeah. Because we have a time ceiling. If we had a heifer that didn't breed or she lost a calf, and we butchered them because they're nice young, good animals, meat animals.

Robyn: Once a cow has calved, can it still be used as beef?

Margit: Yeah. We've had some that had a broken leg or something, and so we've butchered it. Lots of times it's just hamburger because they're tougher.

Robyn: When a cow dies out there, why do you leave it out there?

Margit: In the Buttes?

Robyn: It's just not worth moving it?

Margit: Well, lots of times we move them to one spot, but not always.

Robyn: And by the time you get there, you wouldn't want the meat?

Margit: No. They have to be bled right away. And sometimes you don't know what they died of.

Robyn: Is it unusual—your family—your mother was the cow person, and you're the cattle person, and your daughter was...

Margit: Well, my grandfather, I guess I'm his—my grandfather ended up paying some hospital bills on me when I was born. So I belong to him. And I just loved it, working with the cows and the horses and stuff.

Robyn: Does your mom have siblings?

Margit: Yes, there was five of them.

Robyn: But she's the one that ended up in the Buttes.

Margit: Yeah, and then my cousin who is her oldest brother's daughter, the vet. So she's the other woman that...

Robyn: So is it unusual to have all of these women...

Margit: Well, you know, lots of times, like teaching, it's the girls that are horse crazy.

Robyn: Yeah, but it's not just riding horses. This isn't just like going out and doing equestrian...

Margit: No, it's the animals. It's working with the animals.

Robyn: You don't think about, like slitting the cow open to get the calf out – that's not just doing barrel racing. But obviously that doesn't seem unusual to you.

Margit: Well, we don't do that very often.

Robyn: I mean the whole idea of it being generations of women. You had said to me at one point that you had stories. Are there things that you think about when you think about the Buttes and you think about growing up there? Are there things that come to mind?

Margit: Well, one thing that's kind of like a tradition—I didn't realize it at the time—but like in the '55 flood, I had my opportunity to go and wade up and down the creeks in the Buttes. And I guess my mother had done that. And then my daughter's done it.

Robyn: There aren't often creeks.

Margit: That's one of my fondest memories of that '55 flood is being up there going up and down those creeks and just exploring them with my rubber boots on.

Robyn: So you must know every inch of that land.

Margit: Well, inch is a little bit too small. I mean some places I know the ranch, but there's other places that are really up high and the cliffies and brushy areas—I actually have not walked on every inch. But I know, Okay, you go this way and that way, and you don't go that way because that's just too steep and rocky, especially riding a horse, the routes that are possible.

Robyn: Did your brothers do much exploring? Was it different for you being a girl?

Margit: I don't know. I just remember myself going up and down those creeks. I'm sure my brothers were there; they must have done that some too, but I remember being by myself doing it.

Robyn: That's a nice memory. Have there been other opportunities to do that since then? Other flooded times?

Margit: Well, the '97 we spent three days up there. It seems to me there was another time. Yeah, we drove my cousin's cattle up because they stay down for the winter. We drove them up to the Buttes. I don't remember what year that was.

Robyn: So when you were younger and you had to move the cattle, did you—I don't know how long there have been big cattle trailers to move them?

Margit: It was probably the late '60s when we started hauling them by truck.

Robyn: So before that it was just by horse?

Margit: Yeah, we would drive them back and forth.

Robyn: How long did that take?

Margit: It would take six hours or so. When we came out after the '55 flood, it was a two day thing, because we had tiny calves and the calves would get tired. So we'd put them in the pickup, and then the cows didn't know where their calves were, so they kept going back. And then we stayed

overnight at the Lenenagers. We put the cows in the corrals there and they didn't have water. So the next day, by the time we got down to the lower ranch, the first water they hit was in this big, deep, huge canal. And so they'd go down in there, and then they couldn't get back out. (laughing)

Well, they were thirsty. And it was hot; I remember it being hot too. So they were stressed. They wanted the water.

My mother always talks about—especially when you drove up—she had myself, I was in third grade, my brother who was probably maybe fifth grade, my grandfather who was close to 90 on the horse—late 80s, I think—and herself, and I think that was her crew. (laughing) It's amazing that we got them there.

Robyn: And you were all on your own horses.

Margit: And my mother was leading some other horses because we had to get all the horses up there.

Robyn: Do you remember, either in your memory or looking back as an adult, how helpful you actually were? Were you pretty good on a horse then?

Margit: Yeah, I think I was pretty helpful. I can remember one time my mother and I were driving one cow in, and there's two of us. And I remember her making the comment, "Well, when you do it by yourself, you don't get up there and get too far ahead and head her back." When you drive one cow by yourself you basically come behind her then you have to just go this way or that way depending if she's going to dodge. But when there's two of you there's one person behind and one person usually kind of on the side. Well, I kept going too far up and turning the cow back.

Robyn: Do you use dogs at all?

Margit: Some. My dog out here, but she is such a hyper dog. It's so much work to take her. (laughing) My folks have dogs too; one does pretty well.

Robyn: I didn't know how much cows respond to dogs.

Margit: Yeah, they do.

(To husband, Pete Sands, in kitchen) Is it warm?

Pete: (inaudible)

Margit: Two cups of hot water and a half a cup of calf starter.

(inaudible)

Robyn: What you were saying about wading—do you have other memories like that?

Margit: I can remember in the Butte house, being upstairs and there was just a shingle roof over the top, and you could hear the rain. It's such a nice sound. And now if you go out in the barns when it rains, you can hear the rain on the roof. It just sounds nice. And I remember some early times staying over up there; it was always exciting.

Robyn: There's a picture of you holding a ringtail. How old is that picture?

Margit: Six, seven years old, maybe.

Robyn: And who were you with? Gene?

Margit: I think it was Dave Wyatt, and Gene Trapp was there.

Robyn: How much interaction have you had with the ringtails?

Margit: The first time I really saw one—we have what we call a little wash house up there at the end—there was a five gallon bucket in there, and my father went in and there was a ringtail just curled up in the bottom of this bucket. So he brought the bucket out, showed everybody the ringtail, then he went and put it back and let it get out on its own. So that's my first real experience with a ringtail.

Robyn: And you've had other experiences...

Margit: Well, Pete just had one where he was sitting eating his lunch or something, and he'd been using a chainsaw or something, and here comes this ringtail just wandering around where he was.

Robyn: Are they that plentiful?

Margit: I don't think they're real plentiful. They're nocturnal. I just remember that one curled up in the bucket with big eyes looking up.

Robyn: Your mother had this agreement with Walt to take hikes up there, but at some point you or your mother started having agreements with researchers. How did that come about?

Margit: People would just ask, like Walt, Brian, and Heather. I'm supposed to contact this other person; we're supposed to have an aquatic biologist come up this weekend. When I was telling my mother, she said, "Oh good. That's really good." That's something she's really supported, having research.

Robyn: Do you have contracts with them or just kind of let them come in and do their thing?

Margit: No. And then every so often you get—like someone came in and studied flies _____, and never heard anything back from them. But lots of times we get feedback.

Robyn: What about problems with trespassers? Your land is landlocked so I would think that it would be your neighbors that would have more problems with trespassers.

Margit: Before the road was fixed so well and people went up just about everyday, we'd have people come in, break into the house. One time it was just pure vandalism. They just punched holes in the canned foods that we had left up there. And another time we figured they must have been deer hunters; they took sheets and knives. And then one time someone came in on a bicycle, took out the little lightweight potbellied stove, and took it out on the back of the bicycle, because a sheepherder saw him and thought it was maybe two people going out on a bicycle.

Robyn: I've heard other stories about potbellied stoves being taken. Was it an antique stove?

Margit: Yeah, it was old. It was not a fancy one by any means, but it was old. And then one time someone came in; they took the platform rocker that had belonged to Old Dan. He was the one who I guess died up there, and then the pigs ate his body.

Robyn: I don't know that story.

Margit: I think that was in the '20s. My grandparents would leave a caretaker up in the Buttes, and they would come back periodically—every two weeks or a week. Probably two weeks, I think my mother said, and resupply them with food. And there was domestic pigs that my grandfather had. You know, they had rings in their noses and they were castrated. They're not like those up there now! (laughing) So, one time they went up and they couldn't find Dan. You know, they were retired people, pensioners staying with us. And the dog hadn't been fed—they could tell the dog hadn't been fed. So they ended up calling in the sheriff because they couldn't find him, and they finally found just parts. They found his gun and his glasses and just a few things. They figured that he must have had a heart attack or stroke or something and died, and then the pigs... I have a copy of the article.

Robyn: Do you know of any other stories of people dying up there?

Margit: Not on our place.

Robyn: I heard that there's been plane crashes.

Margit: Yes.

Robyn: Somebody said that there were still parts from planes?

Margit: Yeah. I don't know if you can see it anymore or not, but when you come through Pass Road, you used to be able to see some parts of the plane up high on the—if you're on Pass Road up on the north side you can see some parts. And then there's one that crashed less than 10 years ago, and it crashed on the south side of the Buttes kind of. We were coming out the road and I said, "There's a piece of paper there. Someone's littered." I went over and picked it up and it was a page from their flight manual. So that was just kind of creepy.

Robyn: There's no communication in there so if something happens... From your place, I don't think a cell phone works.

Margit: It depends. Pete's older cell phone works just fine; mine won't. I get up almost to the blue gate and then I've lost it. My grandparents did have a phone line from the Butte place down to the home place down below. It was like one strand of wire that they put on trees, on fence posts, and sometimes they'd have to put their own post up, and they'd string it all the way down. A section went off to the Davis', and then when it got down there, another one to the other Davis'. And then my aunt lived down the road from my grandparents. It was one of those ones that you twist and ring. And then it was always a big deal that the Harvester would go out into the field and they'd knock the wire down. They'd get hung up in the wire.

Robyn: What other equipment was out there? You said the Harvester...

Margit: That was down below when they had a combine Harvester type thing.

Robyn: It would have been hard to get equipment up in there.

Margit: Well, they had—there's a fair amount of equipment still left around the ranch up there that they used, because they would hay, do the loose hay.

Robyn: And this was before the road was fixed?

Margit: This was in horse and buggy days. My mother has a story where she had a team and she had harrows, and she tipped the harrows over some way. The horses were lunging and leaping because they were in mud and made a quick turn to get out of the area.

Robyn: I don't know what harrows are.

Margit: They have a lot of teeth, just a bunch of teeth, and you just drag it along the ground and it kind of smoothes the ground after it's been worked. So she tipped sections of the harrows over. Because they would come in little blocks.

Robyn: And you'd have a team of horses?

Margit: Yes. And then there's always the story of when they were harvesting. They'd cut the hay, and then they'd have to go and pick it up. I think sometimes it was—I'm not sure if in the Buttes they had the thing that put the loose hay up onto the wagon—but, anyway, there's a story of them with the pitch forks, and someone pitching the hay up into the barn, but also a rattlesnake up along with it. And somebody's up there because they needed to spread and pack the loose hay down.

I remember when I was a little girl, they still did it in one barn down below, and you'd have to pack the hay. So I would go and tromp up and down helping pack the hay.

Robyn: Have you or anybody in your family ever been bit by a rattlesnake?

Margit: No. I've seen a calf that probably was. It ended up dying. A friend's dog got bit one of our Easter weekends, and so they rushed it down and they gave it anti-venom. It survived, but it did not live to be a really old dog and they kind of figured that maybe there was some weakening there.

Robyn: There's always stories about how many rattlesnakes are out there. Do you think there's really that many out there?

Margit: I don't know if there's more up there than say, over in the foothills. Because they have them over in the foothills. And the stories—

Interrupted to go feed the calf. End of interview.