INTERVIEW WITH MR. AND MRS. RICH OWENS

My name is Roy Susich and I am working for Mr. Krueger's Local History class with the Heritage Council in the Upper Kittitas County Preservation System. I'm interviewing today two of our local residences, have been residences of this Upper Kittitas Valley for many years. They worked many years in meat packing industry, fact is that was their livelihood. I will be interviewing today Mr. Rich Weens and his wife Francis, and they live in Cle Elum. I believe they're still active in this business.

Roy: How are you folks today?

Rich: Actively retired.

Roy: Also I understand Mrs. Owens that you maiden name was Cusworth, you were also active in mining copper in the Snoqualmie Pads area near the summit.

Some of the topics I will be covering today are: I'll try to emphasize heavier on your meat packing industry and a little bit on your family history. I'll also cover some other history. I'd like to cover the depression and provisions and some of the wars that you've been through.

Roy: I'd like to start the interview out with you today Mr. Owens and I'd like you to tell me little bit about your family history. Like your parents and when they had immigrated here.

Rich: In the years when they started the business?

Roy: No, when they first come over and from where and who was all in the family and how that came to be?

Rich: Come to Ronald in 1889. My dad worked first when he got here. He worked for Sawfield Brothers and Hartman they had a business in Ellensburg, and one in Roslyn. That went on for quite a few years and then he eventually went into his own. One of his first business enterprises was M.G. Ballard, the late M.C. Ballard, he had a slaughter house out on the Teanaway and a meat business in Roslyn. And then he went on til he had several businesses. I just don't recollect each one of the business of them, but he was active in the meat business for many years, I would say until the early 1906. I don't remember the date he, I would say until the
Rich: Early 1920's. He started the meat market in Roslyn in, the meat business in 1922 or 1923, and then there was miners strike in 1927, all of our business was unemployed and broke.

Roy: Your father was Morgan Owens. Did he have any brothers or sisters come over with him to the Roslyn area?

Rich: No brothers, had a sister.

Roy: Did she also come over?

Francis: No too nervous.

Roy: And what can you tell me about the history of your father's shop? How did he go into the meat business?

Rich: How did he conduct the meat business, is that what you're referring to?

Well that's really, it's quite a deal, in those days they didn't have refrigeration. Each meat market had what they called the ice house right next to the market. They'd go up to Lake Cle Elum and they'd cut the blocks of ice in the winter time, they'd store the ice in these ice houses in sawdust and they would hold pretty good too. That's why they didn't call them refrigeration, refrigerators in those days, they were ice houses. No circulation, they didn't hold the meat to good, but they were cool and that was the only source of refrigeration they had in those days. They had a little door, they'd prop the block of ice over the ice box.

Roy: And this system worked pretty good didn't it? You said that your father had started a business and one I don't think if you had that on torpex, what year did he start that business?

Rich: The time? I don't remember the date. I imagine it would be around when he first started his business in Roslyn was about 1907. In fact that's the year that he had the business with M.C. Ballard, was in 1906. I've got the old pictures of that market, oh down here.

Roy: And you had this stock, you had it took over in 1923, you had then, went into business with him.

Rich: No, I didn't go in with him. They had already sold the business, they weren't in it any more. I bought the old building out and started my own business in about 1922 or 1923, I think it was 22.

Roy: And in those days when you had took it over in 1922 where did you get your cattle and your pigs and hogs from?

Rich: Ellensburg mostly. At that time I had an old model T truck, and I drove down there and bought cattle from the farmers and hogs and hauled them up here and slaughtered them. At that time like Kerin had a slaughter house down there and we slaughtered down there.
Roy: And how did you go about this, did you use any of your own cattle in the slaughterings?

Rich: No, not till. No we just bought from the farmers and butchered and that was it. They didn't eat cattle in those days like we do now.

Roy: When you were first opening your business did you find it rough on yourself, or what was some of the problems that you had?

Rich: You always had problems.

Roy: What were some of them you had?

Rich: Well, that's the case in getting your cattle and;

Francis: That one year you were a kid, drove up to the fort with the cattle;

Rich: Even before that when my dad had the meat business up there. I was just a kid 12, 13 years old, and I rode the horse to Ellensburg once a week and drove cattle up here to the Old slaughter house. Was right down there same location where my first family's ranch, and every week I drove a heard of cattle out there.

Francis: He had to stay over night and they got loose on him and some go lost.

Rich: Well that was just one of the disadvantages.

Francis: Then all day long he had to ride his horse.

Rich: But that would get you going along the road pretty good you know, and my dog would come up along side of me and whine and I would pick him up by the collar boost him up behind the saddle there he sat and he'd be watching the cattle out in front if a cow would get out a little bit out of line boy off the horse he'd go, just like that, up there line it up get everything straightened out come back I'd reach down and put him upon the horse again away we'd go.

Roy: Were cattle drives quite frequent back in those days?

Rich: Well it was the only way you had to get them all there. Only the railroad then you still had to drive them from the railroad and you had to go to Ellensburg and drive them to stock yards down there. Then you had two stock yards up there in Pasco too. And in later years why of course that's how he got cattle up here.

Roy: Who were some of the other packing companies who provided competition for you at that time?
Rich: Well Crutcher's in Roslyn, Birkmeer, he had a market in Roslyn and one in Cle Elum and the end of the year, the end of the year at that time I was three, I guess it was, yea.

Roy: Did this present quite a problem?

Rich: Yea, Mike Carak had a slaughter house, I just knocked it down on it's butt at that time, around 1902.

Roy: How long were you in business at Roslyn?

Rich: I don't know we went out they had a miners strike again, we had everything on the books broke.

Francis: About 4 or 5 years in business, I guess so about that then well, yea, we moved to Cle Elum and opened up here in 1967.

Roy: How do you feel about moving to other communities, did you want to stay there or move down to this one?

Rich: Always more activities down here, that's why I moved down here.

Roy: In the meat business over the years, what would you as some of the more significant problems there been over the years? What would you say were one of the biggest problems, I mean a fairly good sized industry-like that.

Rich: It's not only one problem just a series of small problems that created the big problems. Inadequate, I don't care what it is, you've always got problems. And of course the meat business is no exception. Your transportation, your refrigeration, your everything. We used to butcher out in the country out under a tree and that's when I bought the pasture land down here to get out of that problem. We figured we had all of our problems except when we bought the pasture land, it works out we just created more problems. It had more expenses and more everything.

Francis: Our boys were, our boys grew up in the meat business and Richard was born in 1925, Roy was born in 1929 and Christopher was big enough. Why they joined right in and helped their dad all they could when school was out, and then during the World War II Richard had been 17 and he went into the war in the Navy. And Roy finished high school. They helped their dad in the business all through this time as much as they could.

Roy: Ok, in the move to Cle Elum, you say about what year now?

Rich: Moved down here in 1937.

Roy: And that was for what reason?

Rich: Well because there was no activity. The mines were shut
Roy: When you moved down here, when you started what was it like when you moved to the business to Cle Elum, what was the start of it like?

Rich: Well I just started that business hoping it would stick and I went on from there and I done my butchering out in the country and went to another.

Francis: No options here in those days and no feed lots.

Rich: And then I bought a truck, started to go to Ellensburg to buy cattle, butcher them out in the country somewhere or butcher them down there where I bought them and so on and everything and put my feet out and try to have some. So along about that time I had knew a boy that lived up in Roslyn sometimes E give a plant to him, something to sell, and well then I got the idea that the field was plants in the meantime I can, I can follow the roads of government a little bit, then during the war that was.

Francis: Bought all Mr. Donald's point rations.

Rich: So I talk to him well took over plants. I didn't know how much money it was going to cost, but I don't know, in those days I didn't figure on cost, I know what they would pay for a couple pounds, what do I care. I built a shop in 1946 and on it I proved to have done real good. Right up til now, done real good. And then at that time my older son got out of the Navy, come home took him in his apartment, and of course Ray was here all the time and I took him in his apartment. So then that went on until about 1960 when Richard, my older son come up to me and said, "Dad let's run a meat business," and I said, "No, no meat business for me I hate the ole rascal." He says, "Well I'm sorry dad, you don't run a meat business with me, why I'll have to go out and go in cause I'm going in the meat business." "Well alright putting it that way what else can I do. Sure I'll help, I'll be glad to do the meat business with you." Then so we went into meat business, so that went on for quite awhile, done real good to. Still hate the job, I don't like it.

Francis: Still fresh for the meat business.

Rich: So in 1969 it was, we decided I wanted to pull away, pull out of the business, turn it over to the boys, older boy said he was interested in the bank so he wanted the meat business so he took the meat and raised it for the meat business. And after it then, ever since the Ray has the meat, and they're both doing fairley well. Me, I help them do it.

Roy: What year did you guys pull out of retailing?

Rich: Well, we got to the point we were hiring butchers at a slaughterhouse and you paid the butcher $10.00 an hour while standing waiting for customers to come in. We are doing now three times the business with lots of help. We then happily added people on. We often get a lot for business, that's about all.

Francis: We've trained a lot of good young kids in that business.

Roy: Is this mainly a family thing, or afterwards you can hire out for the help or how did this go?

Francis: Oh, it was a family thing, but all the young kids we hired were part of our family.

Rich: Oh, we had different kids they'd come down here, they'd stand around. Just like part of the business was made like from the kids. Lloyd just worked, my wife's brother worked here for about fifteen years. Don Curet's son worked here for quite a few years.

Francis: Don was with us here four or five years.

Rich: Butch Mikas was with us for many years.

Francis: From the time his dad started in the meat business.

Roy: Did you hire guys just for the market, or did you hire them for the packing plants as well?

Francis: For both, mostly in the meat market, that's where we needed them.

Roy: Now I'd like to talk to you Mrs. Owens. I'd like to talk a little bit about your past family history. As I understand it, your maiden name was Cusworth and that was probably the largest family in Roslyn area in the coal mining industry, and that your dad had. What can you tell me, a little bit about your parents.