ROCKWOOD BROWN, BILLINGS, MONTANA

Interviewed by Clay Scott, February 15-17, 2013

RB TRACK 1

00:09 ROCKWOOD BROWN: My name is Rockwood Brown, go by Rocky most of the time. I'm in Billings, Montana, was born in Billings in 1928. My dad came here in 1911, having lived in Vermont, and put himself through school, and came out after graduating from Michigan University and got on the train and got off the train in Billings, and set up his practice in Billings in 1911. So that's it for now.

CLAY SCOTT: "Tell me about the circumstances growing up – were you a town kid, a country kid?"

00:57 RB: My dad was a very enterprising guy. He practiced law, but he had his hand in a lot of other stuff, and he picked up a farm, ranch in Custer, and he ran a bunch of sheep north of Forsyth, in the teens and twenties into the thirties. He told me he made some money in the sheep business, and lost it as well. It would go very fast. But anyway, I kind of grew up in that heritage, and my dad, without really telling me directly, expected me to have a job all the time, and my friends worked, so I did not feel disadvantaged at all. 01:44 So from before the time I was ten, I had a job every summer. And I worked on a couple of farms when I was ten and eleven. And I dug ditches for a plumber for two years – this was at the beginning of

World War II, and there weren't any tractors or backhoes. And then in '43 and '44, I worked at the Billings Public Stockyard. 02:17 And it was an order buying stockyards, not an auction yards, and I knew many colorful people there, and I actually worked after school. I had a motor scooter and after school I would go down there and I would work into the evening on the loading docks. But I had some great memories of working there. And then after that I had a long summer working down in the Forsyth country, north of that in Venanda and Ingomar. And those were really rich experiences I've had. So I've had a good association with livestock, and I've always been interested in cowboyin', uh, horses...that's been my life.

CS: We're going to jump around a bit, but tell me about horses and your experience with horses.

03:10 RB: An old friend of mine that I went to grade school with, and then eventually law school, and unfortunately he's now got Alzheimer's in Missoula and he and doesn't know me anymore, but we started out with horses and we wanted to be cowboys, and we had to chew tobacco, and then we had our ropes, but we didn't have anything to rope, so we'd rope sagebrush. But we did a lot of riding, and then when I worked for Mogelson (?) I did it as a part of my work. Fixing fence, and then we had teams of horses in that job. But I've always been interested in cowboyin' and real cowboys, 'cause I have a great respect for cowboys – not the drugstore type, but the real cowboys of Montana. 03:57

CS: You know, there's the whole imagery, or iconography of cowboys in the West, and you talked about the 'drugstore cowboy,' versus the real cowboy...what is it about that image that is so profound, that affects people so much, that people are so drawn to it? Can you explain it?

04:20 RB: Well part of it is cowboy movies, but the real cowboys I'm talking about don't preen and strut, and don't dress real fancy, but you know they're cowboys – however, you can't tell by looking. I knew a guy, Doug O'Donnell, who was a pickup man for the rodeo, and he was probably one of the best horsemen I've ever seen, and he wore bib overalls. But you'd never pick him out of a crowd as a cowboy, but he was one. So you don't always have to look like one. 04:53

(CS asks what RB meant by an earlier reference to 'Montana ethics')

05:11 RB: Well, it's our heritage in Montana, and I suppose it also applies in Wyoming, and other sparsely populated states, but people just have to be dependent upon each other. Because of the weather, one year, somebody just may lose their whole crop, or their source of earning, their cattle herd or something like that, so people come to help, and they make deals with handshakes, and if they didn't live up to their deal, nobody would work, would do business with them. 05:44 So that's the Montana ethic, and it's very deeply ingrained in people that have reached pretty far back. It seems to me to be a correlation between the more difficult place that it was to

live, like the Hi Line, or maybe even Butte – forgive me for saying that, Butte people! - but there are more genuine people, they're just, I think that that formed the kind of people, the kind of character they had later in life. 06:15

CS: "What do you think people in a place like this can teach people elsewhere? You were talking about a Montana ethic, even in the legal profession, different from California, or different from some other state. Is what you're describing a model for how people should be, or is it specific to this kind of environment?"

06:43 RB: I don't think you can teach people to do that, but it's ingrained. In the legal profession, I've tried cases all over the state, 'cause I started back in the days when a lot of the cases were tried. Very few of them are tried any more. But I've been all over the state dealing with all kinds of different lawyers, but ordinarily running into the same lawyer, two or three or four or five times or more during my lifetime, and unlike some of the larger states, larger populated areas, where a lawyer may only run into another lawyer once in a lifetime, here you're going to see that lawyer again in your practice. And you better well be behaved and treat 'em fairly, or else you're going to get something bad back atcha. 07:31

CS asks about RB's father, circumstances under which he came west, and how his spirit impacted RB

08:15 RB: His name was Rockwood, too. I'm Rockwood Junior, but I don't use that handle. But he and my mom both were

raised in Richford Vermont, which is kind of a poor little town right on the Canadian border. My mom's dad was a clerk on the Canadian railroad, and my dad's dad died when my dad was 12 years old. He had a couple younger brothers, so my dad took over, kind of kept the household going. He put himself through by putting himself through the Vermont school, and put himself through the University of Michigan. Put himself through law school, he and a classmate, O. K. Grimstead, got on the train after they graduated, and they were heading west, and as I understand it, the train stopped in Billings, and they decided to get off. That was in 1911. By the way, my dad's classmate was Branch Rickey most of us know...

CS: "Dodgers."

RB: Brooklyn Dodgers, broke the color line with Jackie Robinson, but anyway, my dad started his practice, he and Grimstead, opened up in 1911, and they found out just starting out, they couldn't pay the rent. So they flipped a coin, and Grimstead lost, and had to spend six weeks – or maybe it was six months – in an Idaho forest, to raise enough money to keep the firm together. But Grimstead died in the late '20s, and my dad then associated with Horace Davis, just a great guy, and I knew Horace. He was from Big Timber, had been a county attorney there. I'd go visit them at their home, and they for recreation would read Latin and Greek. He was a classical scholar, but a great guy. But anyway, he went on and was on the Supreme Court for a short period of time. But my dad

during the time, in the late, in the teens and twenties and thirties, and forties, he developed his interest in livestock. He ran a bunch of sheep in Rosebud County, across the river from Forsyth, up the other side of Vananda, which is a ghost town now 10:51 and east of Ingomar. And he had several big bands, and I remember I was kind of young, but I can remember, he spent a lot of time there on weekends, and the sheep business was very volatile. He told me once about getting a bunch of seven-year-old ewes and putting 'em on feed, and overnight, the value of them went to about a third, and he went to his banker, and said, 'I'm gonna pay you back, it's gonna take a little while,' unlike maybe present day banking. The banker said: 'This is a good time to get back into the sheep business,' and he loaned him some more money. 11:40 And then one summer I had this experience that I was working on a farm down near Forsyth that my dad had an interest in, and bought a bunch of old sheep, and put 'em in, and back then they sheared only in the summer when it was warm. They got the lanolin out of the pelts then, they don't now, and that's why you'll see these sweating sheds around the country, and you wonder what they were used for. They're tin-roofed buildings, they would put the sheep in those buildings, and sweat 'em, so the lanolin would get into the wool, then they'd shear 'em. 12:17 Anyway, these sheep were just fresh sheared, and they had 'em on another pasture, and – this was in June – a freak storm came along, and it got down into the 20's and close to zero, and he lost over 400 sheep overnight. And my job was, with a pony

and a rope, I had to drag those dead carcasses into a pile where they would burn 'em. That was kind of the beginning of my distaste for sheep. 12:50

RB TRACK 2

CS asks about cultural differences between sheepmen and cattlemen, and how RB experienced that as a kid.

01:00 RB: Well, in the earlier years they actually had a war between the stockmen and the sheep people. Yeah, there was a distinction, and my dad loved sheep, and so I don't totally dismiss them, but my experiences with them have been not all that good. That one summer I worked for Mogelson, I experienced a stampeding herd, and lightning struck. I was pulling the sheep wagon then with a team – I'll tell you more about that later. But the sheep scattered, and it took us all day to go find those sheep. Just one thing after another, and after a while I just didn't really care for 'em. I worked with 'em at the stockyards, and they were stubborn, and they want to do what you don't want 'em to do, and all that kind of stuff. But my dad loved sheep, so I never have disliked 'em totally. But they were not my favorite animal. 01:55

CS asks if there was tension between sheep producers and cattle producers

02:18 RB: No. I don't think it did in my experience. I think there was great respect between the two. But you know, in kids' images, cowboy is a certain level over a sheepherder. But

I think among other grown adults, that's not the case, because the sheep business was the fabric of our country here, it was probably even stronger than the cattle business a lot of places in Montana. The Basques were really the epitome of sheep business. And they brought a lot of those into Montana, into northeast Montana, and they were highly respected people. The sheep industry was a good industry, it's just that I didn't particularly like sheep all that much. But my dad in later years with a bunch of friends had a table at the Northern Hotel, and they called it the Sheepherder Table. 'Cause there were a lot of sheep men in it, and they were just great guys. No, I would not...I don't think derogatorily about sheep men at all. And I think they were totally respected by cowmen as well.

CS asks about RB'S mother

03:37 RB: Yes, her name was...last name was Holly, Elizabeth, and both she and my dad lived in this little town. Her dad worked as a clerk for the Canadian Pacific, and she and her sister had free rides on the train. And they'd go...the train would come right to Richford, and they'd go take piano lessons in Montreal, or they'd go to Boston, and buy a ham or something like that with their folks. So it was a free ride. But my dad got out here, located, after about a year, he went back and married my mom, and she came out in 18...1912, I think it was. But they were both born in the 1980's (RB meant to say 1880's – cs), and my mother lived until her 103rd year. She lived quite a bit after my dad. But she was a great lady. 04:35

CS: What do you remember of her? I mean, describe your home life: meals, chores, that kind of thing.

04:45 RB: Well, we had a lot of boiled New England dinners, and a lot of friends of my dad and mom would come into town, and they'd always ask for that, but we had rutabagas and things like that that I never really attached to. Had liver – never really did like liver (laughing). But she was a great cook, and the house was open, we had people come visit us frequently. And she was just a great lady, and she had four of us kids. And lived to her 103rd year, and right up to the end she was reading big, thick books, so she didn't lose any of her brain – she lost her physical ability is all. But she was a widow for a lot of years. 05:40

CS: Women of that era probably generally did not work outside of the house?

RB: She did not, no.

RB talks about her activity with Episcopal Church and her friends.

CS asks about siblings

06:05 RB talks about sister Barbara, married to Harlan Bixby

RB: (Bixby) had a dance band, he was a really great musician, he played the trumpet and the piano, and they got married right after school, and then they eventually ended up in Seattle. And she had four children – nice family.

worked on had a kind of...they'd be kind of bleeding a little bit. And they were tender. But he would use a piece of twine – not a rein – and he would ride those horses, and he could turn 'em into a fence. He had 'em neck reined so easily by using that...that particular kind of a hackamore. 13:25 Well, anyway, I knew from somebody that knew Henry Kammhut when he was younger, and they said he was such a good cowboy – and he always had this sleeping sickness – that they were with him when they were riding downhill, and they were riding some green horses, and horses like to buck when they're going downhill, and this one Henry was on started to buck and he fell asleep, and he was asleep on top of that horse all the way down the hill, then he woke up. Now that's a real horseman. (laughs.) 14:00

CS: That's a great story. You talked about that epiphany you had working with the plumber, saying 'I don't wanna do this. I don't wanna do work like that all my life.' Was it....so that's what you didn't wanna do. Did you have an epiphany about what you did wanna do?

RB: Well my dad pushed me into law, but I wanted to do that anyway. 'Cause he wanted to have somebody come in with him. So I was bent to do that, no question about it. 14:30

CS: I still want to talk about your law career later, but I'm still interested...I have this image of you as a young man here...first of all, what was Billings like, when you were, let's say, a high school kid or college age?

RB: Well, they built Billings Senior in '38 or something like that. The WPA built it. And there was a time in my recollection when you...now it's all developed, but the top of the hill on Grand and whatever street it is, 8th or so, it was all open. And where the shopping center is now, the Partingtons had their Hereford ranch.

15:17 It was all open country. Things were different then. My folks lived on, and I grew up on 31st St., 1100 block, and it was undeveloped above that. Up near Saint Vincent's hospital. And for fun when we were little kids we'd dig caves there. Where it's all filled in with the houses. So Billings hadn't really developed very much, and then the war came along, and then that was the impetus for its rapid growth. But Billings has always been a nice town to live in. And I think it's had orderly growth, which I think is important to a balanced city. 15:58

CS: What did you do for fun as a young man? You talk a lot about...you've only talked about work.

RB: 16:06 I wanna tell you about that summer working for Mogelson.

CS: Please.

RB: Sonny Mogelson had Big Timber Livestock. He lived in Big Timber. And then, uh, he was a real sheep man. And he had this big spread, and some of it, he leased the same land, ironically, that my dad did back in the early 30's, in that Vananda-Ingomar area. Well I went to work for him in the

summer of 1945, and that time is fixed in my mind, because that's kind of the wind down of the war. I worked at his place – Smith Creek Ranch – which was, oh, 7-8 miles out of Forsyth. And I put up hay, fixed fence, and we were always trying to break green horses, so the teams always had a green horse and then a broke horse, and whenever you'd work you'd have a green horse, when you're out working on the fences and stuff, and I had a team with a buck rake, and so that was the kind of (?) was, and 17:27 we would go to town on Saturday nights, the cowboys, and, well, the cowboys were, well, there was one guy in particular I would like you to know about. His name was Emmit Shole (Shaul?) he was from Missouri. And Emmit I'm sure didn't make it past the first grade. And he was fearless on a horse. He enjoyed horses that bucked, but they'd gotten the best of him obviously a few times, because he was all busted up down below. His legs had been broken, and his ankles had been broken to the point where he walked on the sides of his boots. They'd been so broken up there, and not put back together right. And he had a laugh kind of like a hyena. But he was fearless. So we'd ride from Smith Creek ranch into Forsyth every Saturday night, and I was – what was I? 17, I guess. And I couldn't go to the bar, or the whorehouse either, so we'd ride in and I'd go to the movies. And after the movies got out I'd have to sit there till 2 o'clock in the morning when the bars closed down, and then we'd get our horses and ride back. And the horses – my horse, anyway, would always wanna buck. There's a flat spot there just west of Forsyth – and uh, it was

painful, because 2:30 in the morning, I'd just wanna go home and go to bed. Because breakfast was always at 6:30, it never deviated from that. Always at 6:30 in the morning. So I had this old saddle my dad had loaned me – it was a sheepherder's saddle – big high cantles and wrap-around swells on it – and I got so I'd get these jug-headed horses and they'd wanna buck, and I'd want to get out of that saddle, so they felt sorry for me, gave me a roping saddle, so I could flip out first thing, so I enjoyed it more, but that was a regular thing on Saturday night – we'd go to town. And I'd get about two hours sleep, and if I wanted breakfast I had to get up.

19:52 On his ranch we did a lot of work on weekends, I mean on Sunday, six days a week, and then on Sunday we worked in the barn, easy stuff, and we would break the team horses, and use 'runnin' W's.' That's a kind of a slick device where you put a rope through a ring on the halter, down to a hobble on the foot of the right horse, then it runs up onto the riggin, and down through the hobble on the other horse, and then they come back and the driver holds onto it along with the reins, and if the horses run away, you pull up their feet on that runnin' W, and they get down on their knees and they don't like it. So they learn not to do that. We learned how to do that. And Sonny...then the foreman, Leonard Jensen, 'cause I was a city kid to him, you know, he always kind of tests city kids. So I was...he took me up north and I, they took a team and I had a buckboard, and a bedroll, and two horses, one green and one broke, and he said, he took me up to an old abandoned place

up there, he says, 'Well, tomorrow I want you to go....' - they had three wagons, maybe four – sheep wagons. And you had to, the sheep would eat the grass around the wagon, and you'd have to pull the wagon to new grass. So the sheep have new grass. And so that was my job was to tend sheep wagons with this buckboard and team, and I lived in back of the buckboard, but I ate at the sheep wagons. 21:47

And this was in 1945, and they just, they couldn't find able bodied people – they were all in the war. They had one herder and his wife lived there, Irish, and they were just great people, and she'd always make apple pie, and the other guy, I don't know what his nationality was, he just...he...he didn't like the world very much, and this other guy was bad. He, for breakfast – and here I was a grown boy – he'd put a pot of water on the wood stove, and then he would break up bread, and put a handful of lard in it, and that's what he ate. So I ate a lot of canned tomatoes that summer while I was tending sheep wagon. 22:34

While we were out there, another trip, out east of Vananda, we had an episode...they always castrate, cut horses when they are yearlings, and there's this one got away, and there was a two-year-old, so there were three of us. Emmitt Shole (?) was there, and somebody else, and you rope 'em, you gotta rope each hind foot, and then I had his head, big horse's head, so they were in the back there cuttin' away on this horse, and he broke the rope, and he, he reached up and clawed my nose,

and he split my nose open, and uh, we were out in the country, and we didn't go back in town for a week later, so they put some KRS on it, which is essentially creosote that they use to keep the flies away, and later on, eventually, I got my nose straightened out, with old Doc Morledge (?) in Billings...but you talk about the difference between sheep men and cow men...my daughter, the veterinarian Becky, kids me knowing that she's wrong, she tells her friends, 'My dad was kicked by a sheep.' I vocally deny that! (laughing) 23:56

So there we are. That country, that Ingomar country, was wide open. You just...we talked earlier about sage brush. I got to loving the smell of sage brush, and waking up in the morning...but I was with Sonny on the way back – I don't know, he took me home one day for Fourth of July – we stopped in at the Jersey Lilly in Ingomar, and Sonny either bought or sold 30,000 sheep just sitting at the bar, on a hand shake. That's the way it was done then. 24:32 If you haven't been to the Jersey Lilly, you've got to get there!

CS: You know, you speak with great fondness of these times, and places, and circumstances. Are you, are you just nostalgic for those days? Or...what's your perspective on that time when there were fewer...

RB: I wouldn't want to go back, cleaning out pens, or that stuff. Those are just fond memories. The people I met they just were the salt of the earth. And that's really my understanding of the ethic of Montana, the people that I worked with, I think I may

have told you. No, I didn't tell you this. One fellow that I met in the stockyards was Bus Farnum. Bus was an order-buyer, and really a good guy. And I was – this was when I was practicing law, I hadn't seen him for twenty-plus years – and I'd probably put on a little bit of weight, but not much – I saw Bus on the elevator of the courthouse, and gosh, I was enthusiastic and just spewed all over, 'Gosh, I haven't see you for so long,' and Bus took a little while, and he said, 'Getting' a little gobby, aren't you Rocky?' A gobby cow is the one that's rolling in fat, you know (laughing.) After all those years, that's all that he could say to me! But then the Bent brothers, and John Fiester, and these guys I knew in the stockyards, are just very sharp in my memory. They're just...Montana people, and it's why I love this state so much. 26:26

RB TRACK 5 (4 minutes)

RB talks about his role in the family company

RB TRACK 6 (6 minutes)

CS asks how RB developed his system of values

00:44 RB: I can remember my kids kidding me about this. I was afraid to get kind of a fancy car, 'cause of what I call the 'Stockyard Syndrome.' When I was kid working the stockyard, we'd see some guy come by in a fancy car, we'd say, 'Look at the rich son of a bitch!' And that's the attitude I was engrained

in. I don't like to have stuff for show. And I'm sure that's where it came from. 01:11

DAY 2, TRACK 1 (3 MINUTES)

RB TALKS ABOUT MEETING WIFE, LAW SCHOOL AT U OF M