

# Livermore Heritage Guild Oral History

Interviewee: William “Billy” Frates

Interviewer: Richard “Huff” M. Deck

Date: 1981

Length: 0:29

## Description

Lifetime Livermore resident (since 1885), Billy Frates was 96 years old when he gave this interview. He lived on a ranch south of Mendenhall Springs Road, near the east end of Del Valle Reservoir. He describes his life on the ranch, including how he made reins out of raw cowhide, many of which are still in use. He did ranch work for one dollar a day, paying fifty cents for a pair of jeans, and buying three pair of socks for a quarter.

## Biographical Information

William Frates was born on 19 August 1885. His father, Belshow Frates, was born in Portugal and immigrated to the United States in 1870. William’s siblings were Frank, Michael, and Maggie. According to William’s draft registration record, he was short, with black hair and brown eyes. He was once married to Rosie Frates but they divorced before 1930. William Frates died on 9 January 1986 at 100 years of age and was buried at St. Michael’s Cemetery in Livermore.

Following is an obituary for William Frates from the *Tri-Valley Herald* on 11 January 1986.

### **Cowboy Bill Frates, 100, of Livermore dies**

William Frates, a cowboy who spent most of his 100 years raising cattle on a Livermore ranch, died Thursday, Jan 9, 1986. Born in Livermore on Aug 19, 1885, he worked most of his life in the Del Valle Hills near Livermore, branding cattle, cutting fence posts and chopping wood for sale in town. You live 100 years in this goddamn country, you did something right, Mr. Frates told the Herald in an interview in August marking his landmark birthday. A former rodeo roper, he was a man of old-fashioned values. He

watched the Livermore Valley grow decade by decade, and resented the traffic and pollution that progress brought. He never flew in an airplane. "I'm an old timer," he said in the interview. "I got no business around planes." And he was wistful about the way his failing health kept him from working under the hot sun. "I'd rather be working," he said.

Mr. Frates is survived by his sister, Margaret Borba of San Leandro; a niece, Isabella Snook of Walnut Creek; a nephew, Linwood Frates of Los Altos, and four great-nephews. A rosary will be recited at 2:30 p.m. today in the chapel of Callaghan Mortuary, 3833 East Ave., Livermore. A service will follow at 2:45 p.m. at the mortuary. Burial will be in St. Michael's Catholic Cemetery.

**Interview started at: 0:00**

RD: My name is Huff Deck [Richard M. Deck] and I'm here to interview Mr. Billy Frates, whose residence is south of the Mendenhall Springs Road and at the east end of the Del Valle Reservoir. I will ask Mr. Frates now to make some comments and let's get started.

RD: My first question to Mr. Frates is, Mr. Frates, approximately how long have you lived here on the ranch?

BF: I've lived here going on ninety-six years. Me being ninety-six, you know.

RD: And what did you do in your—as a child here on the ranch?

BF: Well, we didn't do much of anything, us youngsters. When we were growing up, we'd chop a lot of wood, used to bale the hay [coughs], pardon me. Bale the hay, work like the devil. Work for a dollar a day, boy, all that stuff.

RD: And you were telling me the other day, Mr. Frates, that you paid fifty cents a pair for Levi's?

BF: Oh yeah. I paid fifty cents a pair for Levi's, and I paid thirty-five cents for those little blue shirts, and three pair of socks [just] a quarter.

RD: You can't do that today.

BF: I don't think so [Laughter]. Never will again neither.

**Time=1:42**

RD: When you were a young man, Mr. Frates, how many schools was there in this area?

BF: Well, when I was around here, there was the Arroyo Valle and the Arroyo Mocho, used to be down there. I don't even remember. You ought to remember because you're a Livermore guy.

RD: I remember.

BF: And there used to be a school up there, San Antone.

RD: And they were one room schools?

BF: Yeah.

RD: And how many teachers per school?

BF: One.

RD: One teacher per school.

BF: Yeah.

RD: And that run through the eighth grades, when they had students?

BF: Had eight, top was eighth grade that I know of.

RD: As you grew up, Mr. Frates, you didn't stay home here on the ranch and work. You worked out.

BF: We used to stay in the ranch, you know, but we could work out, you know. We had a— Pardon me, when I get talkin [coughs].

RD: It's all right. Take your time.

BF: I got a bum throat. When I get talkin, I get choked up.

RD: Just take your time, and as you think of something, why, just, you know, go ahead and add it in. To go to school, you used to ride horseback or walk?

BF: In the wintertime, we could ride horseback because we had a creek over there, the Arroyo Valle. We had to cross that. That was quite a creek. Quite a creek.

RD: That's the only school you went to was the Arroyo Valle.

BF: Yeah, that's the only school. I didn't go much.

RD: You didn't go to the Arroyo Mocho—

BF: I didn't— I only went up as far as the third grade. I ain't got no education at all. You can tell, the way I'm talking.

RD: No, you're all right.

BF: You know we had to work to beat the band. I was four years old when I lost my mother, you know. You know how it is to be raised when—pretty tough. I had a pretty tough life. Damn tough.

RD: And how many brothers and sisters did you have?

BF: I had two brothers and one sister.

RD: Two brothers and one sister. And are they still alive?

BF: No, brothers are dead. My sister is—lives there in San Leandro. She's around ninety-three, I think. She's pretty [unclear] still.

Time=4:17

RD: The Livermore Rodeo was started in the early 1900s. Were you a participant in the Livermore Rodeo?

BF: No.

RD: You never rode broncs or—

BF: I never tried it, you know—I was a guy that—I never liked to—Lot of these people when they went someplace, they liked to show off what they could do. I never liked to show off or anything.

RD: And they tell me that you made some of the best rawhide reins and riatas and what-not—

BF: I made a lot of riatas and I made a lot of reins, and hackamores, and whatever you call 'em, little fob for your watch. That was in the days, you could see.

RD: Where did you get the rawhide for that and how did you process it?

BF: Well, that rawhide, you know, you gotta take it off the cow when it's warm. You stretch it, all ends, stretch it all out. And, uh, I used to put some ashes, oak ashes on it, you know, instead of salt. Salt is the worst thing you can put on a hide when you want to make anything with it because it keeps it soft. [Maybe he means ashes?]

RD: And then what did you have to do to it?

BF: Then you cut a string about 5 or 600 feet long over one cowhide [Laughter].

RD: And how thick would that be?

BF: Well, I think, I don't know, about over an inch. Because it stretches to beat the band, you know. Then I put it in a bucket of water—tub I had—and ashes. Put it in there for two or three days and then into a sack and pull and the hair all come out.

RD: And some of the rawhide reins that you made are still in use today.

BF: I don't know, I made so darned many [Laughter] of them. And years ago, the boys, you know—I used to work over here in the [Arroyo] Valle one time, and the boys around there, buying this, buying that. A lot of that I didn't get paid for. [RD and BF laugh]. That was the worst part of it, you know. [Laughs]

**Time=6:35**

RD: Well, how long have you lived on the ranch, have operated the ranch as your own?

BF: Oh, about thirty-five years I guess, or more. More than that.

RD: It must be more than that, say, like fifty-five?

BF: Well, I first started operating it in '27

RD: '27

BF: When my dad died in '27 I took the ranch.

RD: What was the first automobile you owned?

BF: Model T., '22.

RD: 1922 Model T. And how long did you drive that?

BF: Oh, I must have drove that for fifteen years, I guess. I wish they had 'em again [both laugh].

RD: And when did you give up driving?

BF: When I gave up riding?

RD: Driving.

BF: Oh driving? Let's see—When I was uh—heh—that oughta be easy, Jesus Christ. I must have give up driving about six years ago, I guess.

RD: About six years ago. You were almost ninety years old. And what type of car were you driving then?

BF: I was driving a Ford. That is, a Rancheria. What do they call them? You know those little pickups?

RD: Ranchero. You live here by yourself?

BF: Yeah. Oh yeah, I've lived here all by myself ever since '28-'29. I used to live here with my dad. I run the ranch here. We had cattle and—

RD: And you still do all your own cooking and your housekeeping?

BF: Yeah. What they'd call housekeeping and cooking, now.

RD: Well, it's gotta be done. The place is beautiful and clean. But you still have relatives living in the area.

**Time=9:00**

BF: Oh, yeah. I got nephews. I got a sister-in-law, quite a few nephews. Nieces.

RD: Well, getting back to your younger days here on the ranch. On Saturday nights, did they have dances and what not?

BF: Oh, once in a great while. Oh, about 40 years ago, everybody's giving what they call a surprise dance or something, you know?

RD: And who was the musicians? Who played for it?

BF: Well, we had a gramophone to play. Had those little round disks. I had one, used to take it—Had some pretty good music.

RD: Well, you play the guitar.

BF: No.

RD: You used to strum on the guitar.

BF: No, I wasn't much of a guitar player.

RD: Well, you used to play it though, for your own entertainment. I remember as a little kid coming up here to Lemos's, and we'd come over here in the evening and we'd hear you playing.

BF: I don't remember playing the guitar.

RD: You'd be strumming the guitar.

BF: That's something we got mixed up somewhere because I never owned a guitar.

**Time=10:32**

RD: Tell me, where were you during the nineteen-six [1906] earthquake and fire in San Francisco?

BF: I was here.(RD: Did you—) I could see it from the back porch here. The lights and everything.

RD: And did you feel the earthquake?

BF: Did I?! [chuckles] I was in one of the back rooms there and it just took that door and swung it. And it's the only earthquake that I, you know, felt that, you know, that it was an earthquake—But they been having earthquakes every day and we don't know—never feel it.

RD: Well, that was a pretty good shock. (BF: Yeah.)

RD: And then how about the flu epidemic? That was about 1918 wasn't it, or 19?

BF: Yeah. I got it. That was the time of the world war, wasn't it?

RD: Right, right. World War One. And—you say you had the flu?

BF: Yeah, I had it. Got it bad too.

RD: Pretty bad. Who was the doctor at that time around Livermore, do you remember?

BF: Warner, Doctor Warner. You must remember.

RD: Oh yes, sure. And then he would come to the house.

BF: Yeah. No more of that stuff.

RD: He rode all the way out in his old jalopy— (BF: M-hm.)

**Time=11:57**

RD: You said that you worked on the hay press.

BF: Yes. We used to own a hay press.

RD: You and your brothers owned a hay press.

BF: Yes, we used to rent it out.

RD: And you had all the horses that went with it, to operate it?



BF: Yes, all the horses—and we used to raise horses here.

RD: About how many horses did you have?

BF: My dad years ago used to have a rent [21, 17, 7, and 13?]. He used to be a sheep man, you know, years ago.

RD: Oh, I didn't know that.

BF: He had all the country here rented out.

RD: How many horses would you have at a time?

BF: On the hay press?

RD: Well, I mean, that you owned at one time.

BF: Oh, why I guess about twenty-five [or] thirty head.

RD: You didn't have a harvester? (BF: No.) Or a thrasher [thresher] machine?

BF: My dad had a little bit of—they called it a thrasher machine, little shaker. Small thing.

RD: Did you as a young man ever work on the thrasher machines?

BF: Yeah, I worked on the thrasher machine.

RD: Would that be the man from down there by Pleasanton?

BF: No, I worked at the—Tony Roderick had a thrasher machine. I guess you know Tony Roderick lived down at the foot of the hill. (RD: Yes.) Well, he's still got it there, I guess, in the barn. Pretty nice little machine.

RD: Now Tony Roderick, was he a relative of yours?

BF: No.

**Time=13:30**

RD: No relative, just a friend. You say you sold the rawhide riatas, and reins, and romals, and hackamores that you made? An average pair of reins—<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hackamore is a type of bridle that does not include a bit. Some hackamores have a bosal nosebands, which are usually made of braided rawhide. Romals are braided and are usually attached to reins. Riatas are braided rawhide ropes.

BF: Well, it all depends. I sold them for eight dollars, and it kept a-comin, on climbing up. Some for ten, fifteen, and then the last time I sold was thirty-five. Yeah, but you know.

RD: Now, a set today sells for—

BF: I don't think you could get a pair of reins like that for less than forty dollars.

RD: Oh, more than that. One hundred and fifty dollars. And most of them are made in New Mexico or the states of Mexico.

BF: You know, the main part if you want to have—You want to cut your strings good, you know, and have them all the same size and you braid 'em. Don't pull too much on one side or the other because the braid will kind of get a twist. Now you take this here, you take it and look right straight down through it, you know. Twelve braided.

RD: Twelve braid.

BF: No, that's six—No, eight braid.

RD: Eight braid. And what's the most braids you've ever used.

BF: Well, I've used sixteen. That is to make those— Sixteen strings to make a nose piece of a hackamore.

RD: Ok a bosal. How about a riata?

BF: A riata you have to cut the strings pretty long because they do a little shrinking when you're braiding. You know what I mean? Shrink? Going over and under, you know.

RD: And your riatas would be approximately how long?

BF: Well, nothing less than fifty feet. Fifty, sometimes sixty. Those days, you know, you'd rope outside, boy you had to have rope.

RD: Right. There's not many people today who would be able to use one of those ropes.

BF: There's a lot of good ropers. They had a lot of them.

RD: But not with riatas.

BF: They all use these grass ropes.

RD: Grass ropes, nylon now.

BF: I never could use it because I don't know— To me, when I threw my riata, they're heavy-like, you know. They go out there. You take these other ropes, to me [unclear] you throw it and they go out like hell, and they throw it and it kinda comes back.

RD: How about when they got wet?

BF: They got pretty stiff.

RD: And then they'd get slippery, too.

BF: Yeah, darn right.

RD: Did you ever make any saddles?

BF: No.

RD: You weren't a saddle maker.

BF: No, no saddle maker.

**Time=16:24**

RD: You just stayed in the rawhide itself. Tell me, how often as a young man, between the ages of say eight and eighteen, did you go into Livermore? How often did you go into Livermore at that age?

BF: Oh, we used to go—those days, you had to have a horse or rig. We'd go once or twice, depends what you needed for the house, that was all. Had to drive in, you know.

RD: And that would take you approximately how long to drive in?

BF: Oh, a good hour, I guess. It's nine miles from here to town.

RD: Nine miles. Now that you're—let's say retired, you lease the ranch out for grazing purposes to other people?

BF: Yeah. Well, I got so I couldn't ride. I'm all crippled, so. Having a devil of a time doing my own work.

RD: Did you have any real serious accidents when you were a young man growing up?

BF: No, not that I did—

RD: No broken legs, or—

BF: No, thanks to God. Used to ride some pretty mean horses, you know, but—when you're young, well, you're pretty active, you know. Now, well, a horse jump like that (chuckles)---Aw, shucks.

**Time=18:00**

RD: Well, is there anything else you'd just like to chat about? Like some of the old timers you knew around here. How you used to—ride from here over to Midway.

BF: Something I can remember yet when San Leandro had coal oil lights—You remember that?

RD: Well, no, 'cause I was born in 1917.

BF: Oh, well, you're only a kid.

RD: I'm only sixty-four. But I remember when Livermore had them.

BF: Yeah, San Leandro, Haywards. Well, how I know was the guy married one of my cousins. He was a guy in San Leandro there. Take his cart, and his horse, and a can of coal oil, and you know go out and they clean these lights and puttin' coal oil in them. That was many years ago.

RD: Yes, it is. Did you ever work for the county, for the county road department here?

BF: Ever work for them? Yeah, I used to get— I used to drive a water wagon there. Used to water the road. I think it was fourteen days or something. I don't know. Once a year they'd give you a job.

RD: You had to furnish the horses?

BF: Yeah. Furnish the horses.

RD: And the county furnished the water wagon.

BF: Yeah.

RD: Do you remember how many gallons the water wagon held?

BF: (Chuckles). No, I couldn't.

RD: I think it was around 700 gallons.

BF: I guess, or more, I guess. Quite a tank it is.

**Time=19:40**

RD: When you were a young man here, what was the hunting conditions like here in the hills?

BF: It was okay. Nobody'd stop you from hunting if you didn't bother nobody. 'Cause people in those days, it was like they had brains. Now, they just come and— You want to see what they do up here on my hill. I guess you saw it. (RD: Yes.) Jesus.

RD: Trash all over. (BF: Eh?) Trash all over.

BF: Yeah. And I had the cops out there, five different times, but it don't do no good. I've seen that road just full of cars. I think they said that there was 900 cars started down below someplace up to the top. I called the cops but they had to question so much, they wanted to know what street it's in, and all that stuff, you know? Gets your goat. I don't know what they're going to do about it. They don't seem to do anything about it.

RD: No. I'll tell you, they've got a big territory to cover and just a few sheriffs to do it, so—

BF: Well, they do it now, you know. Before though, a whole damn bunch of the cars just keep a comin, you could see those lights, you know. The cops could see 'em. Now the other night, I timed 'em. They come around around twelve o'clock at night. And they just one light come now, pretty soon another one. 'Cause I'd say by then they just [threw the lights up at me?]. And then another one. But they don't come up the way they used to.

**Time=21:15**

RD: Tell me, what was Livermore like in, oh, 1880, 1890, 1900?

BF: Oh, well it was a small town. Had the stores right in just in main street, the way it was. And they had their flour mill there.

RD: They had some hay ware barns?

BF: Yeah.

RD: They had two or three grocery stores.

BF: Oh, yeah. That seems right.

RD: Several banks? (BF: Huh?) Several banks?

BF: Yeah. I think they had two banks. Now, I don't know how many they've got. They must have a dozen, I guess.

RD: That's pretty close.

BF: In fact, everywhere you go, you see a bank here—

RD: Well, there's not many of the old timers left.

BF: No, I used to have a lot of old timers here that I could talk to, on one thing or another. Used to—Drapers down here, the Lemos, they're all gone. The Rodericks are all gone. The Wilson boys are all gone. All these old timers, that I used to go around and talk to. I'm about the only one around here, and Sachau, that I know of. I used to go to school with Sachau. He's quite a talker.

RD: Alfie Sachau.<sup>2</sup> He's a year younger than you.

BF: Yeah. [Quite a Sachau?]

RD: I still see him once in a while.

BF: Quite a guy.

RD: Well, I'll tell you. There's gonna be another big change in the next fifteen years.

BF: Oh, sure.

RD: I hope you're around to see it.

BF: Never see it.

**Time=23:10**

RD: Oh, you never can tell. If you sleep out here in the open air and what not, why, that's good for your health.

BF: Well, I guess it's okay. When I got the flu, that's the time I started sleeping—The doc says sleep outside. You got a place? I said yeah. He says it's better for ya.

RD: And you sleep out here year-round.

BF: Now, when I sleep in the house, why, I can't hardly breathe. Ain't that funny?

RD: Well, no, there's a certain amount of dust in there, and you know—

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<sup>2</sup> Alfred Sachau (1886-1989).

BF: I'll be a son of a gun. Boy, give me a hell of a time. Guy my age shouldn't be breathing anyhow.

RD: Oh, I don't know. I hope I can breathe as good as you can if I ever get to that age.

BF: My eyesight's the worst thing a going.

RD: Your eyesight's going bad now?

BF: Bad, very bad. I couldn't tell you, you know, from lookin' at ya, I don't know who in the hell, you know.

RD: Do you wear glasses at all?

BF: Tried to wear 'em. I spent thousands of dollars on glasses. Last pair I bought, I don't know what in hell I paid for it. Reading glasses, well hell, I couldn't see a damn thing with them. They take your money, too. You tell 'em it's no good. It's tough when you get old.

**Time=24:39**

RD: Oh, yes. You bet. What's some of the other interesting things you did here when you were a young man growing up?

BF: Oh, I don't know. I didn't do much of anything. I just worked, that's all I know.

RD: Well, you always had your ranch work to do.

BF: Oh, yeah.

RD: You had your own cattle to take care of, help the neighbors.

BF: One thing about years ago, the neighbors helped one another. That's gone. We used to stack hay, and haul hay, and put hay in the barn, you know. You'd help this neighbor, he'd come and help you, then help the other guy. There's no more of that.

RD: When you'd ride over to Midway, to the Mulqueeny ranch, to help with their livestock, would you stay several days when you went over there, or—

BF: Oh, yeah. We'd always start in from up there in this part of the country and go, you know. It'd take about a month, you know, or three weeks. And just ride the horse to this ranch. Pretty soon they'd say we're gonna have a roundup at a certain ranch. You'd ride over to that ranch. Rode over to— Mulqueeny is the farthest I ever went, was Mulqueeny ranch. Used to be an old guy, an old buckaroo. I've been trying to think of his name, but I can't think of it, you know. He was from Pleasanton. He's an old guy.

RD: What did he do?

BF: He was quite a buckaroo. He was my partner for everything. He wanted a kid ,he'd, you know, take my part all the time for everything. About ropin' and one thing and something. He'd had something caught, you know, and I'd [unclear] the feet, you know— Some guy'd run in and he'd say get the hell out of there [coughs, Laughter]. Geez, I can't think of his name. Heads no more good.

**Time=26:40**

RD: How about the rattlesnakes up here?

BF: Oh, I kill a lot of rattlesnakes.

RD: You do. You have quite a few of them right around in here.

BF: Oh, yeah. I've killed quite a few big ones. One year here, they done some poisoning you know. And damn poison killed about all the squirrels there were. And the next year, I guess they couldn't get no squirrels, and they'd come from the hills down here. I killed four one time around the house here. Big ones. (RD: Is that right?) And every one that I killed that year, oh, I guess—I must have kilt ten or twelve—all great big ones.

RD: They seem to be kind of seasonal, though. For a couple years, you won't see many, and then you'll see some.

BF: I think they feed on rabbits, you know, and rats and one thing or another. And I guess when they poisoned, they killed everything, and they kept moving.

**Time=27:32**

RD: Well, it's been a nice little interview, Mr Frates.

BF: I'm sorry that didn't—have much to say.

RD: Well, no, no. That's just fine. I know you get tired and what not. So, we won't tax you too much on this thing. We'll keep you happy so if we come back again, why we can have another interview with you, all right?

BF: I ain't much for interviewing. My head is no more good. I can't— If I want to think of a name, you know, I can't do it right away. After you've gone, I bet you I'll be thinking of some other name, you know.

RD: Oh, sure.

BF: But that's the way it is when you're old.



RD: Well, I realize that you're not a young man anymore, and I don't want to tire you out—tax you too much—because maybe some other day we may want to find pertinent facts, and we could always come back this way. Well, thank you very, very much, Mr Frates.

**Interview concludes 28:28**

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