

Oral History Program

OH-466

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Brigham Young University - Hawaii
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Milford Rogers Hamon

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2006

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY-HAWAII
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
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INTERVIEW NO: OH-466
DATE OF INTERVIEW: April 17, 2006
INTERVIEWER: James Kester
SUBJECT(S): Templeview, New Zealand
Milford Rogers HAMON

PE My name is Milford Rogers with an "s" on, Hamon, H A M O N and I was born in Gisborne on the 23rd of December, 1930, Joseph Smith's birthday. I was brought up there, in short, until I was nine years old. Remember the start of the Second World War very well and also the depression, that is the happenings of the depression. My father coming home with all his books and that sort of stuff, you know he was an accountant, things coming home on holiday, but then he went down to work in the ditches, in the cemetery, and things like that, and we learned that it was hard times. We shifted up to the King country, 1939, stayed there for two or three years. By this time I was 14. I left school at 14 and went to work for the family. 14 of us all together, 14 in the family, five girls and nine boys, quite a crew. We moved down to Rotorua, and my father got another job and his head office was in Rotorua. We stayed there for about 9 years and then one night in the middle of the night, President Halverson turned up, he was the president of the mission at that stage, walking. His car had broken down somewhere in the pouring rain and he'd walked to see my dad to call him on a mission, to go to Thames, and build up the branch and that sort of stuff there, which he did. And we followed suit because we were still tender in age then. We lived around Thames for many years. I moved, I got married in 1953 and moved to Rotorua, moved around, had a lot of businesses of my own, some of them successful, some of them not so successful, but never did I go broke, came close to it many times, but never did I go bankrupt. Paid all my bills and even the failures. Then we came to Hamilton in I started 1964 when I started my own business up. That's when I took an interest in the bush, that's when I came here. And that was a, oh well, in between times of course I served a mission. I served in the Korean War in 1950 for 22 months.

INT Where did you serve your mission?

PE In New Zealand. In the far north, and in the Hauraki District, that's over the Thames Coromandel Waihi area.

INT You served in the Korean War in the Air Force?

PE No, in the Army. I was in the Corps of Signal. Corps of Signals, I was attached to an English company. I served in the Korean War and also I was one of the first six, I was amongst the first six of the labor missionaries ever to be called in New Zealand. One of the first six.

INT So you worked on Church College?

PE Worked on Church College, worked on the farm here. I worked in the temple and mostly on chapels after that, Auckland chapel first of all of course before all this got going, and the Rotorua chapel, the Thames chapel, those ones, I worked on during the time I was on my labor mission.

INT Where'd you learn to fly?

PE I have always had an interest in flying but I learned to fly here, after about 1964. Because I had no schooling, no secondary schooling, ended up at standard 5, I left school at Standard 5, everybody told me I was too dumb to learn to fly so I put it off, and put it off, and then one day I thought I'm going to have a go at this and just see how dumb you've got to be to fly (laughs). So I snuck out to the flying school at the air drove without telling anybody because I knew I wasn't any good and I thought I wouldn't have to tell anybody if I failed. But the instructor there was wise enough to get me up in the air within five minutes of me turning up. I've talked to friends who flew and I knew how to stabilize a plane if it got into a spin only because they told me. Synchronize all the controls and let go the joy stick and it'll... it wont come out of a dive but it'll go straight instead of spinning. Sure enough jolly instructor did this to me. He put it into a fully developed stall, and when you get into a fully developed stall you get into spin and spun. I said, Get it out of it (laughs) expecting me to freeze. Well, I just pushed the center, centralized the controls and let go of the joy stick and she went straight and of course, I didn't know how to fly it then but anyhow I learned. Learned 6 hours of flying solo and had a lot of plane experience and I was one of the first pilots for Eagle Airways for instance, one of their first early pilots, but mind you I wasn't flying the big planes. The biggest I flew was twin power and mostly on the small cessna aircraft, and 180s, 135s, 6 cylinders, 6 place seat aircraft, just the smaller stuff, even though I did fly Hercules once as a friend of a friend who was a pilot in the Air Force. I could not fly it on my own, I couldn't start the motor for starters, wouldn't know how to start it. I could stop it (laughs) (mumbles).

INT Can you tell us a little bit about you. You talked before you started the recorder about your genealogy, your family history. Give us a little bit, give us some background.

PE About as much as I can remember now, I'm a terror at remembering these things. As I think of these things, from my Dad, there's over 500 descendants from my father and mother's side. I can't remember them for sure. My mother was pure blooded English woman and that's why grandmother and grandfather on her side are fair haired. From myself, there's my dad, and then there was on this side of the maori side back through here, through my great grandfather was Arapata Taniwha, he was a real warrior. He was in the glory days of the maori chiefs when they went out and killed each other if they had to, he did. There's a few people who think that my grandfather made up a story but he used to tell me a story consistent to be about my, his father and it was his step father in actual fact it would've been, where he came home with a leg of an old warrior that he had killed. And he wouldn't eat it, he invited him to have dinner with him, but he wouldn't eat it because he knew he was about to eat the flesh of an old english traditional way. But some of them say the old fella was teasing him and that he had a leg of lamb or something like that you know (laughs) but he used to tell the story consistently and it was a leg of lamb he thought it was a human leg, you know when he was a kid. The old way we go back through the charts (?) of Hamon's, I have genealogy right here that goes back to, which I have to do

something about, which I haven't right back to the 1600's or 1500's on our family side which I have gathered. So we go back through that side where the Hamon's come into it and then of course the maori side. I'm lost after great grand father. Is that enough of that?

INT Yeah, so after your labor missionary work you came here and started working and took interest in the bush?

PE Yes, well, of course this bush used to go right up to the road and they were cutting it down in the 60's when I happened to come along. I happened to be a high counselor at the time for, this was one big stake then the whole Thames, all over, Rotorua, Taupo, and all.

INT There was virtually no vegetation here then.

PE There was no vegetation underneath, but the trees, the big old trees, were reaching right up to the road like it was here, then, and I cut them all down, and they were cutting all of these out too, for firewood and for decorations, and for mostly firewood. But they were clear felling the whole lot, but in between times they were taking these things out. I came along one day and I saw this happening and I wrote a letter to the General Authorities with a proposal to save it and they never answered personally, they obviously passed the letter on to the appropriate authorities, the appropriate people who were dealing with the land and I got a letter back from them saying go to it. And so I just spent part time, when I could, coming in when I could. People didn't know, it was just quiet, people just didn't know, full stop. I used to come in and out here on average at least once a week and sometimes more often just weeding pulling out the rakes, burls, doing all sorts of silly things. And then came a time when people started to use it. Just two or three a year.

INT This would've been about what year you think?

PE Oh way back in the 80's and so I thought it was time to do something more serious. So I came in here with a caravan and a little caravan and nobody knew that even at that time hardly, there might be one or two did, but they found out later, some that found out later, but at that stage I just came in quietly, never said anything, didn't ask permission, except I got the go ahead from Salt Lake, for the congratulation (?) to work here. Because I'd taken the step without having to be commanded type of thing. From there, well, I used all my own equipment. I financed it myself for years.

INT Just starting clearing little bit by little bit.

PE Little bit by little bit. Just with the old little lawn mower and flash hook, no chainsaws, no nothing, all hand work, shovel, all by hand.

INT All obnoxious weeds.

PE Yeah, pest weeds. So full up with rubbish, one big rubbish dump right through here. Dead beasts, old vehicles, tens, steel and gates, you name it, it was just all the way through here and nothing growing. Nothing growing at all, it was bare as this floor. The opossums, rabbits, stock, of course was in here, had eaten both the trees bare and the ground bare. It was as bare as bare. So anyhow, when I came, the first thing that I did was to make it stock proof. Well, for a couple of years I had trouble because the local leasee or the share milker who was share milking for the church at that stage was very, very uncooperative. And he cut my fence which was flimsy enough then and I learned to patch up the old fence that wasn't there type of thing and let the stock in. So I plant something, stock would come in and eat it. So I got sick of that after a while and decided to fence it properly. Which I did at my own expense. Fenced this whole bush – by hand.

INT How many acres is that?

PE At that stage, there was around about, I think there had to be around about 12 acres. And now there's around about 20 acres. Not having to measure it up exactly.

INT But currently still all fenced in?

PE Fenced the whole lot. On my own. Digging holes, mind you I was a lot younger then too, digging the holes with the spade and ramming the posts in, and straining it up with the wire out, and that sort of stuff. I was doing round, I fenced it round about, which was considered very slow between 15 and 20 minutes a post. I was putting in, just plodded along, digging these holes in the clay and that was my speed of fencing so we got it done too. And then of course all the tracks I had to dig by hand until I got a school digger, they used to lend me the school digger and I'd dig and gradually upgrade them and until the stages you see them now. But I was financing this on my own and spent quite a few thousand dollars I'll tell you. It'd be around \$15,000 I'd say of my money originally, roughly, never did keep an accurate account of it. And then one day a man turned up out here ??? the story and announced himself as Bishop David Burton and I said oh yeah I didn't know who he was, I said you're the Bishop out in Taranaki aye and he said No, from Salt Lake. I'm near the twig. He announced who he was and was here with his wife and his daughter and son in law, or the other way around, son or daughter in law, can't remember which and they spent a lot of time here and then they said Roger you shouldn't be spending your own money here. He said, put in for a grant and he said, I'm only one of three but I'll back you. So it was an invitation. I put in for a grant that was only for toilets way over here, I thought I'd make them really flash toilets, so I spent \$23,000. We had no power, no nothing, no water, no nothing. We had to carry everything in and everything else by hand and they granted it, but it got stuck up in Auckland. And they didn't pass it on to me. And by the time I realized that it was there and said "Hey, where's my money, I

need it for ??? or something else you didn't pick it up fast enough or didn't want it fast enough, it's expired, so I didn't get it, so they told me to put in for it again and we'll back you but don't put in for any more than you had before \$23,000. But of course, I started to think about this and talked to a couple of my mates and things like that did they said put in for the lot so that I put in the for the cost of the buildings, the cost of the water, the sewage, the power coming in, the easements surveying and all of that, and it came to \$65,000. So I put in for this and they wouldn't put it past Auckland. God bless them. They said they we didn't want to insult the general authorities by putting this in and they said put it in again but only for \$25,000 or your \$23,000. But anyhow, President Glenn Rudd was the Area President and he used to come in here regularly as clockwork and would call in to see me, old friends, since youngsters, back ages in the 30's, late 30's, that I can remember, when he was on his first mission. And he used to pop in here on his way to conference, and I said to him, have you seen my request for funds President, No, where is it? He said no, have you got a copy here and I did or he said "I'll read this on the way to conference while I'm flying up" and I said, Do that, and if you like it, will you sign it and put it on the desk of the presiding bishop. He did just that and of course bypassed Auckland and they had the wind up on me for a long time and said how did this fella get all this money without going through us. And the last words that President Rudd said to me when I saw him about two years ago were, he said, "you know Roger, there's one thing that I'm sorry I didn't do while I was Area President" and I thought what on earth could that be, and he said "Get you more money for the bush." So he thought about that one. But when Bishop Burton was here, two things, three things he said that stuck in my mind was one he said "Roger, you're a pioneer in your own right. Do you know that? (mumbles) And he said, this is the first registry of its type in the world in the history of the church outside of America ever to be undertaken right here. And then he said, I was trying to be a bit modest you know and I said "Anybody could've did it Bishop" and he looked at me and looked me in the eye and said "Anybody could've done it Roger, but you're the only one who did." And so here I am, and then he asked me for my plans of the place. What my future plans were on it and I rattled off all these things I wanted to do and looked at me with eyes big as saucers getting bigger and bigger and says "You're going to have to live six lives to accomplish all of this" so anyhow, he realizes its probably going to take more than my life time to do them and that's exactly what he said. But he was very, very impressed as everybody has been since they came here. When I came here, it was a different thing all together to what it used to be and I'll show you a picture of it shortly.

INT Can you tell us about some of the different species of trees, some of the ones that are your favorites and the ones that are more endangered or rare?

PE OK, we have swamp *mairi* here. In the Waikato there was 30, up until a few years before I came here, before we assessed the bush and what was in it, there were 15 known swamp *mairi* left in the Waikato only. And they were scattered here, there and everywhere. And we discovered 15 down here which rolled the

numbers immediately to 30. But now, since then, and that was many years of course, they've been coming to take seeds every year, and have propagated them, and now of course, there are thousands around.

INT Department of Conservation.

PE DOC and big Hamilton gardens, the Hamilton nursery, they come in regularly and Ruakura research.

INT So you've been working with the state and the countries organizations conservation, and so they've seen you as a resource to help seed some of these other...

PE They come in regularly to come and get the rarer trees and some of the trees that there's plenty of, that sort of stuff, that are seedlings, that come up there are thousands. The beauty of this place is that there's been mature trees here. They haven't been able to seed because of the opossums eating them and that, but now that they are, they are seeding regularly and growing little plants regularly. And that's what you see out my nursery out there, some of those plants. But we have two or three very unique things in here, probably more than that. One, we have the largest accumulation, whatever you want to call it, concentration would be the word, of native trees anywhere in New Zealand right here in this block of bush. That's the varieties in their natural state and there's over 150 species that's going down to the lichen and the ferns and stuff like that here that we know of and they're increasing too because once the birds start to fly in from out of this place here for them to roost they bring in other seeds – native seeds which are genuinely accounted as being natural because it's the way they do propagate them. So there's over 150 different species of trees and that here. We have one of the finest, or the finest stand of *paua* left in the area. The finest concentration of *paua* trees. We have the largest concentration of *karaka* trees, which is a maori fruit tree, anywhere in New Zealan, in land, right here, in the bush here. We have two of the largest known *pukatea* trees and a couple of the oldest ones and they figure are round about a thousand years or more old. And we have one of the largest known *rewarewa* trees right here in the bush. So, you know, there's those sort of things which are very, very important and people come from far away to see them. It is an excellent missionary tool. One of the best that I know of and the easiest to approach because people come in here thinking it's my bush and of course I have to tell them how long have you been here and how long have you owned it, I don't own it and I'm the care taker but the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints owns it and they're just as interested in your spiritual well being as your physical well being. And this is a part of the physical side of the activities of the church which allows places for their members to come and relax and other people too and also I would like to invite you to visit the Visitor's Center if you'd like to know more about us and see those very, very gracious hosts down their who will respect your religion but will answer any questions openly if you want to ask them. And so that's where you know it ends. But with the school children, I

have the little thing there that we showed you that the tree nearly fell on me and I loan them up there and who answers your mother and father when they call you and someone says yeah, I do, or I say I'll come in a minute or I'll come when I'm finished what I'm doing, things like that, and then I tell them a story and their eyes are as big as saucers.

INT Will you tell us? Will you relate the story to us?

PE I was just sitting one day down the forest on a lovely, warm, quiet, still day, summer day, and because it's such a nice day I've got my tools beside me and I'm digging out little plants there that I want to transplant. And I hear my name called, up above, well of course we come from a family of 14 and we were taught to answer immediately when mother or father called us because there were so many of us and if we didn't there'd be chaos and we got the switch if we didn't too, make us hurry up, which we deserved 99% of the time, we didn't think so at the time but later on thinking about it, we deserved it all right. So it became an ingrained habit for us to respond and it still is with me. And somebody called my name from up above from back on the top, and I said I'm coming and so I hopped up and walked over there, a few yards and crash, down came a tree right across from where I was sitting. A big tree.

INT How big of a tree are we talking?

PE We're talking about two feet at that area, probably round about three feet at the butt, it was up from the butt where I was and a huge head which would cover probably around about 20 meters radius, you know the head branches and all that sort of stuff down there, crashed down. And I called out to the person up above and said "I'm OK" but there wasn't any response. And so I thought I better go up and see if the ... whatever happened with the big crash, but I thought it was a bit strange that they didn't come down and see that I wasn't injured. But when I went up there, there was nobody. So I just take that as a guardian angel, the response of training for years and years to answer and respond when one is called.

INT So your tool box....

PE is still under there. The only thing I got out of there was my drink bottle and it was just a little bit behind me, I think the drink bottles still there, never did pick it up. I think somebody else might have picked it up as rubbish and taken it away. So that's it from a humble beginning of around about from, well, you name it, it could've been three or four people a year up to now, we get up to seven and a half thousand people a year. Last year was the biggest year of non members which was 820 non members. Each one of those got a personal invitation to visit the visitor's center to learn more about the gospel. This year so far, we've only got April, we've got over 400 non members and I've got bookings for probably another couple of hundred before the end of May that are coming, Women's Institutes, and things like that, schools, and the likes come in regular. And they

get me to talk to them and make sure that we tell them about the plants. We've got a maori group coming in and we told them about the maori medicine plants which the place is full of. Just about every tree is maori medicine but probably 60 that I know of are the known ones that I know. 150 trees I cannot remember all the names, I'm still learning. I know about 70, I can rattle off about 70. So, far from finished learning here.

INT So if you had... what's your final vision for the place?

PE If I had my own way, I would have it ring fenced with a vermin proof fence because of the precious nature of the bush itself. It's been quoted by professors as a national treasure now, as a national treasure. Professor Parch from the University of Wellington was in here and he classed it as a national treasure. He is very well known and respected botanist and so that it is. And its not just to entertain, it's a great missionary tool, but my vision for the future is that it remains in tact as a national treasure and sponsored by the church refenced with a vermin proof fence, that probably will never happen, but still that is a thought and then of course, all the vermin will be got out of here opossums which is ongoing here. I spend two or three hours a week out hunting opossums, trapping, poisoning, we wouldn't be bothered with opossums, rabbits or states and then the wildlife, our own wildlife could be reintroduced into this area big enough to carry a certain amount and if there was over crowding with the native birds and things, then they could be relocated because its small enough for them to be relocated. We have round about 35 different species of birds in here now as they have different kinds of fruit trees come in to season, so the different birds that feed on those particular types of food come and eat it so they come into the bush. But our biggest problem is opossums. There's 80 million, 70 million, 80 million, somewhere around about there, we've got to destroy about 40 million a year to keep them on par.

INT 70 million – oh boy.

PE Yeah.

INT This is so I make clear, this is on the record, this is not a paid position, this is voluntary.

PE This is voluntary and no, this is not a paid position and I'm on a mission, a service mission for the church after serving here for 40 years they said they'd call me on a mission and I suppose I could say this, and I mentioned it to you, but I got it official today from Bishop, that he'd been contacted by the general authorities to say that I'm to stay on when my mission finishes. I think I told you this yesterday and that I'll be getting an official letter shortly on it. So I'll be here for a while yet, probably until I die.

INT Well, this is about the most impressive thing I've ever seen and it's an incredible life's work and we appreciate it so much. It's amazing. Thank you so much for spending time with us and telling us about it.

PE Oh well, this is a story that as I understand it, we were living in the bend of a river, my dad was living away, I mean he wasn't away, he was working away for the week at the freezing works and he came home in the night time and he would come home by various means, sometimes by horse, sometimes by bus, I think mostly by bus, and we lived in the bend of this river, but it was on high ground, and when I say high, it was probably about 15 feet or so above the water level and he used to swim across the river and if it was in flood, he was very strong, my brother Ray would stand with a lantern and he'd get up stream and he'd know where to strike out and he'd swim in the dark and he'd come across because the flood waters would come down stream, but even with the normal water he would have to get up stream and to get across, but anyhow, this night, it started, there was a downpour. There was a deluge of rain up the valley. And it must've been years before, yes, it was years before, some farmer up the valley had planted some pine trees and the waters started to come up, this was night time, in the evening, the water started to come up and my mother said we have to get out of here but we'll have prayers first. So, by the time we had prayers and went out to go out the back and onto higher ground, the water had come up around the back of the house in the low spot there, we were up around there like that, we were coming around there and we couldn't get out. In the morning the water level was six feet up the hedge above the house, above the level of the ground, six feet up there and my dad, he, at that time over at Preparata they were doing a railway and it was such a heavy downpour that a lot of the Europeans lost their lives. But the Maoris didn't. President Cowley told you this one in his book, I remember telling him telling it very clearly that the question was asked "Why did you Maoris not get, any of you not get drowned but all the pakehas have drowned," and their response was, the Maoris response was, the pakehas ran for their money and we ran for our lives (laughs) we got out of it. But he went and said in the sea of mud as you came up over that hill because he was anxious to get home because he was expecting to have lost us all, there was just this tiny speck of green in the middle of a sea of mud. I believe that it was those pine trees but there was big rocks also, but I reckon it was those pine trees that saved the house, that the rocks came rolling down us were big as the house and the trees and trunks got lodged on them and I reckon it diverted the water that way.

INT Or do you think it was a response to prayer he gave?

PE Yes, that was the story because naturally he did pray. He was praying all the time about us. You know being saved. But we've had lots of experiences like that. When great grandma joined the church, she was a *tohanga*, she was a herbalist, and the story goes that she would go out into the forest and pray to her mother to let her know what herbs to use. And her mother used to come and point to the herbs she was to use. At this time there was two missionaries that had got lost.

For three days they were lost in the bush and they came out upon this pa, this marae where there was a sick child, and I think it was my grand father, and he was dying. And she'd go out and pray to her because they'd brought him to her to cure. She'd go out and pray to her mother and her mother would come and raise her arm, both arms, like that and she couldn't understand this of course and this happened three nights at a time and things were getting pretty desperate with this kid. The elders stumbled onto the marae and naturally they asked them if they wanted to have some food and sort of stuff and they said yes, thank you and could we pray, could we bless the food. I can remember this clearly, the missionaries, the early missionaries, they raised both their hands to the square when they'd pray and they'd raise their hands to the square and of course that was the sign and great grandma got them to bless the baby and of course got well. That was one of the biggest conversions, mass conversions in that area at that time. That's when we joined the church. We've been in the church I think nine generations now, I think its nine generations from that time. Her father joined before, you know, before her.

So that's those little stories there.