

Jim Bennett

9/20/03, T1, S1

JB: ...get to watch her take pictures and develop the film and make prints.

I: Would you just explain a little bit more explicitly your relationship, your family relationship to Mae Stearns personally?

JB: Oh, okay. Yeah. My mother... Okay. My mother is a niece of Mae. Her father, James Edward Stearns, was a...was a city commissioner and the city manager for those early years.

I: For La Grande?

JB: In La Grande. James Edward Stearns, right. And...

I: Do you know about what time, or what period that was?

JB: He was... They'd moved over to La Grande from Cove in the early 1920s and they built the house here and went to work for the city. He was a carpenter. Then his sisters were twins, Mae Stearns and Frances Stearns. The whole family had moved to Cove in 1882 and built the home over in Cove. Their...

I: Where...

JB: I'm sorry.

I: Where had the Stearns family come from before Cove?

JB: They came from Grand Haven, Michigan. Mae was born there in 1878 and the twins were, of course, born the same day.

I: Do you know why they decided to move to Cove?

JB: Lotten Benson Stearns was a Civil War veteran who...he and a brother established a planing...a wood planing mill in Grand Haven. Somewhere around 1880, 1881 it burned down. Lotten Benson Stern's sister, Frances Carline Payne Stearns, brother had established a farm in Cove, a creamery and, you know, a...the creamery and just a large farm over in Cove in the early 1880s.

I: Do you know how she happened to find Cove for that purpose?

JB: I really don't know how the Payne...the Paynes found Cove somehow. So when they got burned out of Grand Haven, Michigan they moved...came to Cove.

I: Do you suspect that there was some kind of publicity about Cove that would've gotten to Michigan?

JB: Yes because certainly...I'm not...I think Cove became...it was Forest...originally called what, Forest Glen...or Forest Cove.

I: Forest Cove, yes.

JB: And I'm not sure. There was some...I know musical contacts in Michigan in the ____ and Michigan era there. I'm still... I'm still tryin' to research some of that. Anyway, they for some reason picked up and came to Cove. It's somewhat of a mystery, I guess, you might say. The father... By then James Edwards was getting to an age where he...he was becoming a carpenter, too, in that era...area. They built the house, a large home there in Cove and...and...

I: Approximately across from what is now the Ascension conference center?

JB: It must be. I...

I: Is this the same house that was near Mae's studio?

JB: It was right beside Mae's studio. They built it on their land.

I: That's where it is.

JB: And this was...

I: There's a new Episcopal conference center that's been built almost directly across the street from that.

JB: I think it must've been right by that...near that. And...

I: So that house was built by who?

JB: Lotten Benson Stearns and his son James Edward who was only in his twenties or something by then. And they bought lot number 1, I think it is, in the McDaniels Addition. I don't know if you've heard of the McDaniels?

I: Yes, I have. Fanny McDaniel was especially well-known for having a mountain named after her.

JB: Oh. Uh-huh. So then Mae...of course Mae was there and as she became a teenager she went to work at that Lang store and so forth. But my mother...

I: Explain that a little more.

JB: All I know is that she started working there and there she became...got a Hawk-eye camera to start taking pictures of customers...

I: This was Dave Lang's department store...

JB: Yes.

I: ...in Cove?

JB: Uh-huh. As far as I know that...yeah.

I: Do you remember anything that she might've said about it?

JB: No. I guess it was quite a...kind of a...like a merchandising store or something. No, I don't... She probably told me more about it when I was four or five years old, which I can't remember.

I: Do you think that's where she bought her Hawk-eye camera?

JB: I think probably she got it through that store. But it was while working at that store that a photographer came to town with a tent and a camera. Then... So this is in the...around 1900 or 1901 or '02. My mother was born in 1901 so up in...up in Promise, Oregon, which my great-great-grandfather founded with John Phillips, Daniel Mann founded with John Phillips. They built the original log cabins, pioneer cabins in what's now Promise, Oregon. They called it...

I: Did he do that because of logging up there?

JB: Originally...I have to... I don't think so. I think they just wanted to get a piece of land all their own and at that time is when these big 160 acre tracts were being, you know, he'd get a grant from the government for a...you have to go live on it and develop it or something to maintain it.

I: Do you think they are the ones who thought of the name Promise?

JB: Yes. Apparently my grandmother, Anna Mann, when they first went in there on horse, of course, on horse and wagon they called it the Promised Land. It sounds like they were somewhat of...all the people in those days were fairly religious 'cause we have Promise and some of those other Biblical names up in there.

I: From what I've heard about it, though, the way it worked out, it was more of a disappointment than a promise.

JB: That's true. They almost starved to death, I think, the first winter there. There's some interesting stories on that side of the family about the cattle falling off the bluffs and having to try and get into Wallowa for food when they ran out of food.

I: The land for farming purposes wasn't very promising, was it?

JB: No. No, it's not. It didn't... It didn't quite do. I don't think... I think the Carpers or somebody hunted down all the elk up in there so they... The Carpers were a family that finally moved in.

I: It's a little later there was a lot of logging around there.

JB: Yeah, especially down around Maxville there, something. The logging like the... My grandmother's brothers that Mann...of the Mann family worked in logging then when they came along. They were born in the 1890s up in there so it'd been 1900 up to 1920s or 1920 that they worked up in there. They finally all moved out.

I: Tell me again what's the connection between Mae Stearns and people in Promise?

JB: My mother was born there and her brother, James Edward, my mother's father, he helped deliver...helped to deliver my mother up in Promise. Jean's mother mother Mann, Elizabeth Mann, was a midwife actually. She delivered a lot of babies up there. There's no doctor. So the...the...they just delivered it and my mother always told me that my grandfather really botched up the naval on my mother when he cut the cord. She had a big protruding naval all her live because he botched up. Anyway, shortly thereafter the family, James Edward and Anna Mann Stearns, moved back to Cove to be at the Cove...the Stearns house in Cove. And, of course, that's where Mae was living, too. So Jean was the niece of Mae Stearns then. Then Jean got... She led a very protective environment because her...

I: You mean Mae did?

JB: No, well...

I: Her mother?

JB: Yeah. But Mae was a fairly... Mae's mother was awfully picky. She hated the dirt and dust of Cove, apparently, being from Michigan and all that. She didn't like Cove. It was so wild or crude, yeah. Then in 1909 my mother's mother died of apparently malaria she'd contracted when her family'd been to California or something. She died and what's interesting here is that Ed Stearns later on married Mae Stern's partner in her studio at Cove, Beth Fellbaum.

I: How do you spell that?

JB: F-e-l-l-b-a-u-m. They called her Boppie. She became Jean's step-mother then. She was real strict. My mother...all her pictures you'll see are she's got quite...a dress on, a big bow in her hair and she...any pictures taken, pretty much, she was pretty well dressed and kept clean, you know.

I: Now, you mentioned that she was a partner of Mabel...or Mae. Explain that.

JB: Yeah. The Fellbaums were a family from Texas who came into this area around Pendleton and Walla Walla. I think... I'm still trying to find out how Mae Stern met Beth Fellbaum, but they became very best friends. In fact...

I: Do you think met in Cove?

JB: Either Cove or over in Walla Walla. Have some or...a picture taken in 1902 of some kind of a photo studio probably over in Walla Walla where they had their pictures taken together. They became partners in photographic effort around 1905.

I: Tell me how the connection between Mae's working in the Lang department store and buying a little camera and opening a studio. There sounds as though there's quite a story there.

JB: There must be. I don't know the whole story other than this photographer came to town and set up in a tent behind...around, beside Lang's store. And I may have a picture of that tent, I'm not just real sure because the photographer finally up and left and he left all the stuff there and Mae finally negotiated with him to buy it and purchase it from him and learned to...learned the techniques or the trade.

I: She was self-taught mainly?

JB: I think she was 'cause we...

I: Did she ever mention studying any other photographer's work or reading books about photography?

JB: No, she never did. I think she just experimented a little.

I: Picked it up...

JB: Yeah, just from this photographer. You know, well, she must've maybe came...they used to come to La Grande quite often, I think, but I think she might've picked up some from...was it Ritter? Harry Ritter. He was an early photographer here in La Grande. I don't know if he ever... I don't know the name of the photographer that went in there and I wish I did. I'd like to find out. But it...

I: ___ Pat Fitzgerald's transcript ___ talked about early photographers.

JB: Oh really? Uh-huh. Yeah. If we can find out that'd be a nice addition to the...to the history.

I: Do you think she started the studio in 1905?

JB: Some... Yeah, right around somewhere right in there, or maybe even a little earlier just in the tent there. Because they finally... It took I don't know how long to build this new studio for her in Cove. I think it was a kind of inaugurated somewhere around 1906.

I: She must've had a pretty good concept of photography as a business.

JB: Right. I think so.

I: Do you think by that point, 1905, that she was committed to photog...to begin a photographer professionally?

JB: You know, I think so because, you know, before that she was destined to go to a music school in Boston, which I just found out this year.

I: Destined by her mother?

JB: Probably, yeah, I don't know. The family was all very musical. They all played probably violin, mainly. But I have pictures of she and her sister playing in the Cove orchestra and they had string quintet or octets. All...all these women...they had a big women's group there and they were all musical. I must've... And of course Mae was very active in church and Sunday School. She had all these lady friends there and they...they just all had a great time, I think.

I: Where did she get her musical instruction?

JB: I think a lot of that was pretty much self-taught just from her father...I mean...yeah, her father I think played. I don't know of any specific person she names as a teacher.

I: Did she play something besides the violin?

JB: Not to my knowledge. No, I don't know if they did.

I: And when you said "destined to be in music" what do mean by that?

JB: I found an article... This year I found an article that I think was in the Observer that was about her, this young Cove violinist who was very proficient and was probably destined to go to the Boston...

I: Oh, just because she had talent she seemed meant to be a professional musician?

JB: Yeah. And I... And I still don't... I just...you know, I hit upon this news article, clipping – I got tons of clippings and stuff and I still haven't been through all of 'em. It just mentioned how she was probably going to go to the Boston Conservatory of Music or somethin'. I'd never heard that before.

I: Maybe that was sort of PR for local consumption. [laugh]

JB: Might... It probably was, yeah.

I: As far as you know she had never been admitted there?

JB: No.

I: No.

JB: I don't think so.

I: It may have been her desire...somebody else's desire that she...

JB: Somebody... Somebody was gonna sponsor her, I guess.

I: So you think that she decided that photography might be a better route for her?

JB: I think she took a real liking to it. As soon as she got going there's just dozens of pictures of various areas around the Grande Ronde Valley, especially Mt. Fanny, the Cove...Mill Stream in Cove, you know, pictures of Cove from the hills and then pictures of groups...gaggles of girls and gaggles of boys. In those days you could gather all the kids that lived in Cove into one group and get a picture of 'em. I'm... I'm still... There's a lot of kids in there I'm still tryin' to get identified.

I: Do you think that these photos come from the 1905 period?

JB: They come from 1905 to about 1910 or '12, a lot of these early pictures come in. Like especially, well, like the __ Festival of 1912. The first time I see a car in a picture 'cause most of the pictures of the Stearns family are taken in wagons, they traveled by wagon and so forth.

I: Do you have any notion whether she was selling pictures at that point?

JB: I believe so. I believe so because she was takin' pictures... I don't know what they were selling for, but I know at least later on she used to make prints of all these old films. And my mother then, Jean Bennett Stearns...Stearns Bennett, started tinting those pictures probably around when she became a teenager. She was very artistic and somehow she learned how to colorize these pictures.

I: I think you should explain more about that because most people younger than we have probably never heard of tinting photographs.

JB: Yeah. Do you want me to talk more about that?

I: Please.

JB: Of course in those days the photographs were all black and white and print 'em up on nice matte paper and then you could colorize them with... You could use any color to colorize them. But my mother used to do a lot of water coloring. When she was twelve the pictures that she drew herself, you know, pictures she drew and colorized probably was watercolor. Then they found that for the matte finish on the photographs that using oils, linseed oil and turpentine...they didn't use linseed oil, it was turpentine and, you know, some other oils, oil-based paint. So when I was young, of course, then and when we moved away from...moved away Mae Stearns would send pictures to my mother wherever we lived and have her tint 'em up, put instructions to color this a certain color. Sometimes she'd send 'em back say, "this has to be a more tint there and change...change this color." So you could take turpentine and wipe out the one color and put in another one.

I: Did you have the impression that when Mae was giving those instructions she wanted the color to be as close to nature as possible?

JB: Oh yes. Yeah.

I: That would ____.

JB: Yeah. They'd... Especially in portraits they wanted the eye color correct and hair color and clothing color had to be...she was very specific.

I: Apparently, then, it would be true to say that their aim in colored photographs would be very much the same we have now in taking colored photos.

JB: Oh, oh yeah. Although I think in those days they tend to maybe give a brilliant of color in the sense than it might've been if you take a digital...

I: Improve on nature?

JB: Yeah. I just got a, you know, for example...well, I can show you this later, but down at our reunion yesterday somebody gave me this. This is done by my mother and you can see how the colors are. These are gonna be blocked out where you'd run over...you get backgrounds. But you can see how... Background colors could be anything that would kind of offset or enhance your...

I: Sure. Was this a photograph of you?

JB: Yeah. Yeah, that's my graduation picture from La Grande High School.

I: And was this tinted by your mother then?

JB: Yeah. But anyway, the point is that they just...I...you could call it colorizing or tinting or...

I: Yes.

JB: ...anything.

I: It's a good job of coloring, I'd say.

JB: Most of 'em I think...

I: It doesn't look unnatural.

JB: Her tinting I thought was very good. My mother became, you know, later in life she became a professional artist, drawings and stuff. Anyway, we got this...I think we got this link between Mae Stearns and Jean Bennett, I hope, kind of down.

I: Yes. Yes.

JB: So where do we go?

I: Alright. When did you first come acquainted with Mae?

JB: We had moved to Wallace, Idaho where my father was a grocery there. So then Mae Stearns would send these pictures to my mother and then occasionally we'd drive to La Grande to visit, especially when my mother was pregnant with my other brothers. I would come down or me and my brother would come down while my brothers were being born in Wallace or something and we'd stay with the Stearns family and of course Mae was right across the street. So I became oriented to her activity. She'd let me be in the darkroom with her while she developed the film and then printed up the old printers with printing up the pictures and developing the pictures and then you got to dry them on drums.

I: To the extent that you can remember, you were pretty young when this was happening, tell me more...in more detail about an experience in the darkroom with her.

JB: All I... Well, it's just... It's a dark place and it smells like a fix.

I: Yeah. I mean the interaction with her.

JB: She'd... She'd put a... She'd take a film and she'd show me and demonstrate how she dried out...dried the films, hang 'em up and dry. Then she'd put 'em on this printer and she'd say, now you...show me how you put the paper, she'd show me how you put the paper in. Then the film's in there and you put the paper on it and you push down on this and then I think she had a foot pedal, you know, and she'd say, "Now you have to count, one-thousand-one, one-thousand-two, one-thousand-three." And then you take it out and you throw it in the developer and see if the time was right. If the time wasn't right...you're gonna make a bunch of prints anyway, but you have to sometime just go by hook or by crook at the timing. It's learning how to count... I still work at counting, one-thousand-one, one-thousand-two, one-thousand-three.

I: Sure. ____ way of doing it.

JB: Yeah.

I: Describe her voice.

JB: It was fairly...hard to...well, a musical feminine voice. It wasn't real high, it was medium tenor, you might say. She was a...usually, around me anyway, she was an upbeat woman who tried...was always pleasant, tried to... The main lesson I got from her... I got brainwashed by her about... My father smoked and she'd always say, "Jimmy, I hope you never smoke. It's such a dirty filthy habit." I remember that lesson. And lo and behold when I... She kept repeating that over... Every time we'd come to La Grande she'd say, "I don't like your father's habit of smoking. It is such a dirty filthy habit." And lo and behold when I got to be twenty-three or twenty-four and tried to learn how to smoke I couldn't do it. [laugh] I've been trying to implant that in my grandchildren, a dirty filthy habit. But that's Mae Stearns' contribution to...

I: Very good.

JB: She was very humorous person, though. She'd always try and tell us riddles. Her main riddle was "Why does Uncle Sam wear red, white and blue suspenders?" I'd always hang up on it and pretty soon she'd say, "Well, it holds his pants up." [laugh]

I: Why did the chicken cross the street?

JB: Yeah. They had a... That whole family had a whole bunch of, you know, riddles like, "What happens to the white dog when you throw him in the Red Sea?" [laugh] They go on and on. And they... She'd get out her fiddle and sometimes we'd...they'd play chicken...Turkey in the Straw. I don't know where the song came from. She used to sing it to us. The song...I don't know if it came from Promise, Oregon or where, but the song goes, "The turkey in the straw. We didn't have any money so we fed the baby hay and the poor little darling's getting weaker every day." [laughs] Then it's "toodle-doodle-dum, toodle-doodle-day. Getting really weak every..." So.

I: The events you're describing now took place at about 1933?

JB: Yeah, 1933, '34, in that. We were in La Grande every...almost, I think, every summer there while I had other brothers being born or we'd come down and visit.

I: Now at that time women's skirts were getting shorter, but how did Mae dress?

JB: She dressed fairly conventionally in those days.

I: She didn't wear a skirt that went down to the floor did she? Or did she wear pants?

JB: No, no, she wore skirts, but they were mid-calf, if I remember correctly.

I: Even when she was working in the darkroom?

JB: As far as I can remember. Yeah, I think so.

I: I wouldn't have been surprised to hear that she wore pants.

JB: Uh-huh. I have a picture of her...taken a...of her in pants, but... I have a couple pictures of her I...where she was working. Often when she took pictures of groups, though, she wore dresses I think. I don't think she...

I: That would've been a little more respectful, I suppose, ___ other women.

JB: Yeah. Yeah.

I: Did she have long hair?

JB: Medium-length hair.

I: What color?

JB: Brownish. Yeah. Brown.

I: Did she wear it up on top of her head?

JB: I have a picture at the age of twenty, beautiful picture of her, with her hair pulled up around her head really beautiful. She was a beautiful lady when she was young.

I: Did she ever wear make-up?

JB: That I don't know. She may have. She may have, but not much. She didn't overdue it.

I: Would you call her physically robust?

JB: Moderately robust, yes. But, well, pictures of her when she'd about twenty years old she was pretty...quite skinny and wiry. I have... She used to go chaperone, I think, my mother and father when they were courting here in La Grande. They'd go up to Morgan Lake and Mae'd be having...they wore pants...or hiker pants in those days. They'd wear all day hiking.

I: Was she a horseback woman or did she do other kinds of physical activities?

JB: She was pretty much a horseback woman.

I: She was?

JB: At least in Cove, yeah. I have a picture on...

I: She rode a horse?

JB: I think... Yeah. The family had a horse named Henry over there in Cove and she... I don't know if she rode... She has a picture of her on top of Mt. Fanny on a horse. Dramatic picture. But then there's pictures of horse trains they're gonna pack into the Minam. They go... I suppose they go up around Mt. Fanny somewhere into the Minam. Then in the early days... I don't know if the Stearns family ever really owned a car in there, but they did go in...some of their friends or relative would take 'em for...you know, put 'em in a big old open touring car and go for a ride.

I: What else can you tell me about her personality and her habits?

JB: She... She was... She was a classical old maid, she never married. She had...

I: Why do you say classical?

JB: You don't have to put this in your recording, but I tell my friends she was a classical lesbian of the Grande Ronde Valley. She was friends with all the women...unmarried women almost of her age.

I: I think that's well-known.

JB: Mabel Martin, Dellinger, Mabel Dotey. Mabel Dotey lived with her for years.

I: Yes.

JB: So, you know, it's... In this day and age I think it was a normal activity in a sense. My mother used to tell me that she had boyfriends back...way back when, but nothing ever really panned out and who knows why.

I: I think we can infer why.

JB: Yeah. But, yeah. That's true. She... But she really was an upbeat person around when I can remember and very positive, very forceful. She attended church regularly. She was very philanthropic. I can show you articles about how the... summaries of how she used to give donations to people that needed it, you know, or support some of the... She established a scholarship at Eastern Oregon College of some kind, at least for Cove girls or something. Just her...her demeanor was one of upbeat...[end tape]

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JB: In the early 1930 or 1929, right in that era, in her darkroom one day she grabbed a hold of the water faucet and at the same time with the old brass chain light and it almost electrocuted her. She finally fell to the floor. She was about of an age where I suspect she reverted to... She couldn't work for, I don't know, quite a long time after that.

I: Was there a sort of paralysis?

JB: I don't think it was paralysis so much as the shock.

I: Yes, but what...what were the longer term effects of the shock?

JB: She would just had a nervous... What I was told she was having a nervous breakdown. I think it... In those days they called it invalutinal melancholy, when they're going through the menopause. She was about that right age to go through the menopause about then. I know that it...in her diary through that period she would right that Bess Stearns, her ex...her old friend from Cove, who was now married to Ed Stearns, she'd come over and stay with her all night. And she would say, "Bess came over and stayed all night and it really helped," or something like that. Kind of notes that in her diary and that's the only clue we ever had about her...her physical state, mental state.

I: So you think this accident occurred when she was maybe mid-forties?

JB: Yes. Uh-huh./

I: And was it in La Grande or Cove?

JB: It was here in La Grande. 'Cause... No, see, she moved over from Cove about 1924 and they built her...I think her father and brother built the house she... It still stands there today.

I: I didn't realize it was that early. Tell me a little more about that. You said she might have come to La Grande because there was more business here?

JB: Yeah. I am not sure why she fi...she may have come to La Grande to... The Stearns, Ed Stearns and his...his...he was now married to Bess Fellbaum. At some period there during the 'teens I think they came over to La Grande and built a house. Mae stayed in the old Lotten Stearns' home in Cove. I'm in a little... During that period, though, she was fairly active in photography. I don't know how much Bess Fellbaum Stearns helped her in that activity over there. But we have pictures taken...these pictures dated 1917 and so forth still taken in Cove, __ and wagon. Then finally '17 we see the whole family in a big old touring car, which I don't think belonged to the Stearns, but it was friends...you know, friends and neighbors. So Mae was still active in those areas with her friends over there and taking photos, I presume, in her Cove studio. So I am still not sure exactly when the cut-off came for her or why it came other than her desire to be over in La Grande with Ed and Bess, you know, I should think.

I: One little more thing about the Cove studio, was that set up so that she could both take photographs there and process the negatives?

JB: Yes. Some of the...the, you know, chairs and everything I saved...

I: Posing chairs?

JB: Chairs or the...they had the stand...stand or thing they'd set the kids in, you know, she took pictures of children.

I: What kind of a camera do you think she was using then?

JB: I'm not sure. I still have one old camera of hers, you know, the big wooden fold-out camera.

I: On a tripod?

JB: On a tripod.

I: Was there a black cloth that goes over the photographer's head?

JB: Yeah. I don't have the cloth. I have the camera, I have the tripod.

I: Uh-huh.

JB: Yes.

I: And then that's where she would've had glass negatives, do you think?

JB: Yes. It was that or then she learned how to load the film in those...the black carriers, the film carriers, you know. They were, what, eight by ten, six by eight or somethin'. You load those and slide 'em in. First on a ___ glass you focus your camera and then you slide in the film holder, pull out that thing and then you open with a ___ on that line you open the camera, count one-thousand and everybody had to hold still, of course. I'd learned some of that, "You have to hold still, Jimmy," and "hold real still. Now don't move." I've got a great picture of me she took. I see the same chair from the Cove studio that was in her La Grande studio, you know, the same kind of a backdrop put up.

I: Do you have guess when she might've stopped using glass negatives and switched over to the paper?

JB: I really don't know because I think there was a...

I: ___ silver nitrate film, wasn't it?

JB: I think so. Uh-huh. As far as I know.

I: You don't know when she would've made the transition?

JB: No. It probably occurred about the time the technology came out for that because...

I: I suppose so.

JB: I'm not sure the date of that. Somebody'll know what that it. There's a lot of research I need to do in that area.

I: Sometime in the '30s, surely, or maybe late '20s.

JB: Yeah. It must've been about the late '20s 'cause I only have a few of her glass negatives. I don't have very many of those. But one or two of 'em are of the classical pictures ___ the prints, you know.

I: By the way, do you think that during the time that she was using the kind of photography mechanism that required a long exposure time that attached to the back of the chair or couch would've been a rod to hold the person in place from moving?

JB: I don't know. I never saw that in any of her... I don't recall it from her studio at all.

I: In the late 19th century that was used commonly.

JB: Yeah, that's true.

I: I think maybe by the time she was doing it it processed a little faster that they didn't have to have a twenty-minute pose.

JB: Yeah. I don't know.

I: You just saw the chairs.

JB: Yeah.

I: Do you remember anything about any kind of scenery or backgrounds that she might've used?

JB: No. In her studio was just a plain big black cloth...grey...grey cloth, or, you know, and it kind of had a hazing of white on it, I think, to kind of outline the head or something. I...you know, it'd be...you know, this'd be like...kind of like whatever this was. And of course when you tint it you can lighten it up or darken it down.

I: Black background can sometimes be done by light, placing a floodlight in the right position.

JB: Yeah. I... I'm not familiar whether or not she ever used all those, you know, light...open up the thing and have the flash stuff go off.

I: Powder.

JB: Flash powder or flash bulb finally. I don't know if she ever... I think she finally used lights.

I: Electric lights.

JB: Yeah, electric flood lights when I was familiar with her La Grande studio. I don't know what she did in Cove for lighting. It'd be interesting to find out. I don't know. Maybe...

I: Is there any way of knowing?

JB: Miskle might remember, I don't know. I should go... I should go talk to Miskle. Is Miskle in a nursing home?

I: At the Wildflower Lodge, yes, the latest of the retirement homes.

JB: In here in La Grande?

I: Yes.

JB: Oh. Has she got her marbles yet?

I: As far as I know, yeah. There was a picture of her in the Observer. Her birthday was on September 16th.

JB: Oh yeah.

I: A birthday party and she looks wonderful.

JB: Yeah. I should get over and see her. Let's see, where do you want...?

I: We were talking about the move from Cove to La Grande. You said she wanted a house in La Grande.

JB: Yeah, they built her a house here.

I: Who's they again?

JB: Lotten Stearns and her... No, her father would...it'd be Ed Stearns by now.

I: That's her...

JB: Her brother.

I: Her brother.

JB: Her brother. Yeah. Her father was dead by now. I think that's probably another reason, too. After he died probably pretty much all along over in Cove.

I: If the house in La Grande was built for her to live in I suppose there was also a studio that was planned in part of the house.

JB: The early pictures of her house didn't have a studio on it. When she first came to La Grande I think she worked for the Red Cross Drug...Ritter, the photographer here in town, as far as I know. I don't know much about that. Until they built her a house and

then finally they added a studio onto her house where she could open her own business there. So I...I don't know how much work...independent work she might have done through the Red Cross Drugstore or Henry Ritter's studio.

I: You think that happened in 1924?

JB: Yeah, beyond that then, yeah.

I: Would she have been about forty then?

JB: Yeah. 1928 she was...

I: You said she was born in 1888?

JB: 1878.

I: 1878?

JB: Yeah.

I: Oh. She's way past middle-age.

JB: Oh yeah. So when she... Whether or not she ___ whatever she ___ I'm not sure what all. It was part hormonal, I'm sure, whatever they called it, invalid melancholia. Maybe she had it earlier than I thought. Maybe she got shocked then after that. Because by 1924 she'd 've been...in '28 would be ____.

I: Are you sure about 1878 for her birth? That sounds too early.

JB: I have a... I know it. I'm sure about that. I have her birth certificate in my records.

I: That makes her, what, twenty-two in 1900.

JB: Yeah.

I: So in 1924 she was forty-...

JB: Forty-something already.

I: ...probably four.

JB: Maybe she started that involuntional melancholia then.

I: That's quite likely, yeah.

JB: Yeah. And I'm not exactly sure when she got shocked. I can remember telling me about it. When I was in her darkroom she'd say now, you don't...you don't do this or that, you know. Don't grab the water and the chain.

I: If you born in 1928 obviously all of the work in the studio was in La Grande.

JB: Oh yeah.

I: ___ were talking about Cove.

JB: Right.

I: Was it the studio that had been built onto her house?

JB: Oh yeah. It was there when I...when I knew...discerned it. So it was not too long after 1924 that I'm sure she had built the studio on and maybe...I'm not sure the timeframe on that.

I: You said the house was still there and the studio still there?

JB: No. They've taken the studio off, I think, 'cause they... The Williamson house is gone. They've put in a business on that corner there kind of over that area there. So I don't see the studio on there anymore. It was around to the side and back of it...of her...added on there.

I: Do you remember well enough to describe it's size and how it was fitted out?

JB: Yeah. It was... You went in a little side door there and opened into a room. The studio proper was probably about fifteen feet wide and all the props and chairs and lights and the other there. Then you go about twenty feet long back in the room. And then part of it went on over into her garage on back of the house where the developing part of the studio

was. It'd be probably about twelve feet long by five feet wide. It was a small developing studio where you'd go in and you really felt like you were in a cave and it smelled like developin' pictures, you know. Of course developer, I guess. The... All these pans arranged. I still have some of her old pans, you know, that you dip the...dipped all these films in. A sink there and washing...washing set up to wash the pictures. She had at the far end of this developing room was a drum drier. I think... I don't know what __ she got that in. The drum...you'd put these pictures out on drum and pull a canvas over them to crush...get the water out and you'd heat it up. I think they were run by light bulbs inside. And heat up the drum and pretty soon the pictures'd be dry and pop off the stainless steel...polished stainless steel cover. So it was not a very big developing room.

I: But for one person it was adequate, I suppose.

JB: Oh, for one person, yeah. Yeah.

I: If this was attached to the house did she heat it in someway?

JB: Now that part I'm not sure if she heated it or not. I was never there in the wintertime that I recall. She may have. I'm not sure what kind of heating she had in the house.

I: You assume that people called on the telephone to make appointments to come and to have portraits made?

JB: Yes. Uh-huh. Somewhere I may have her old phone number. 'Cause when I... I know even as a teenager here in La Grande get the operator on the phone and...

I: I think we could find that in La Grande city directory.

JB: Probably. Oh yeah. That's true. Yeah. I hadn't ever thought of that.

I: Do you have any idea how much of a business she had in portraits? Studio portraits as opposed to going out on location to do shots of school kids and so on?

JB: I don't think it was real heavy, but I know she had some. My problem is that most of the pictures I have are just of our...you know... My mother when she was young was the most...she and her brother was the most photographed kids in the USA. And then when I came along and me and my brothers were the most photographed kids and grandkids in the USA. So we have dozens and dozens of pictures of family. Now I have many dozens of old film, just packets of film there. I've never analyzed them to see if they're on...you know, go out to locations.

I: You mean negatives?

JB: Negatives, yeah. I'm sorry. The negatives where you go take a picture of the family in front of their house, a lot of those. __ little houses or family reunions snapshots at the house.

I: They didn't do snapshots.

JB: Yeah. Well...yeah.

I: They wouldn't have called them snapshots I'll bet.

JB: Oh no. No.

I: Photography.

JB: Yeah. Oh yeah. Well, 'cause they were off and they were the big formal pictures, you know, of the family weddings, the big weddings. I have a picture of the Tommy Conklin. I don't know if you're familiar with the Conklin clan...

I: I've heard the name.

JB: ...over there in Cove. Dozens of people at the wedding in front of the house, you know. No, she... I think she had some business there. She advertised herself as specializing in

kiddies...kids, you know. She did portraits. The picture she took of me when I was about two-and-a-half or three years old was really a classic picture.

I: Both from your experience of being photographed by her and whatever you know about her photographing other children, do you think that she had some special ability with kids?

JB: She may have. I'm not real sure about that, but she sure took a lot of pictures, you know, pictures of...

I: My understanding is if you're gonna be a successful photographer of children you have to have a way with kids, you have to quickly set them at ease and make them smile and generally be appealing.

JB: Yeah. It worked on me. Yeah. Yeah, I got a great picture of me. I can't remember the time she took the picture. She had to really work hard to get me, I know, 'cause I was blowing a bubble in a pipe. I didn't know how to blow bubbles, but I was learning fast. She finally got a classic picture of me blowing a bubble with one of those old bubble pipes they used to have.

I: I think it's probably the mischievous kids that if you get them at just the right moment _____. [laugh]

JB: Yeah. Yeah. As we got older the four of us boys every Christmas she'd take a picture and use it for Christmas cards. By the way, I have dozens of pictures of...you know, they put on postcards. That's how I date the time if the postcard was written on and mailed it has a stamp on it. Some of those pictures I have an easy time of saying exactly what year they were taken in.

I: In that connection, do you think that she took any photographs of places in the valley that were put on photographs...I mean, on post cards?

JB: Yeah.

I: She did?

JB: She had a picture of Mt. Fanny and...

I: Was that part of her business?

JB: ...Mt. Emily and... Yeah. I think so.

I: Some of those.

JB: 'Cause some of 'em are imprinted with gold lettering that say, "Mt. Fanny, 7,146 feet" or something like that, you know.

I: I remember what I was going to ask you. Do you think Mae typically signed her photos or otherwise identified her as the photographer?

JB: Very definitely. Her... Her early photos was ___ in a nice strip that "Stearns and Fellbaum." And I have a picture...it's a classic picture of a steam engine...the old steam field mower fell through a bridge and there's a guy standing over it looking at the camera. For a joke on some of my stuff I made a copy of the picture and then I put a bubble above his head saying, "Oh heck!" You know. She got several classic pictures of things like that. The Indians in the prune orchard. You've probably seen that picture. I got a wonderful card with a picture of slipper that they drew it a porcupine. The slipper's full of porcupine quills. She took a picture of that.

I: Bedroom slipper?

JB: Yeah.

I: Or a woman's ballroom slipper?

JB: I think it was a bedroom slipper 'cause they'd be out camping in the tent and this porcupine come wandering through a tent and they'd throw somethin' at it, you know. So the slipper was full of porcupine quills. Then she takes one of the quills and she pokes it into the... I've got the postcard. The quill's in the postcard.

I: That reminds me. That might be called a study photograph when you take a tree and you're interested in the bark or a lake and you're interested in the ripples on the lake or items of clothing the photographer's interest is obviously in that thing and the texture as apposed to the person who's wearing it or any human ____.

JB: Yeah.

I: Did she do photographs like that?

JB: Not... Not too many that I recall. She was mainly... When she was here in La Grande most of her groups were school kids, you know, Ackerman, Willow...

I: You said she did photograph Mt. Fanny and other geological objects.

JB: Yeah. I don't know if she ever really published those or just put 'em out in postcards or anything.

I: It's the kind of photography I assume she was more of a park photography, ____ Ashwell Curtis and ____ Curtis and ____ of photography. I'm just wondering if Mae might have known or been influenced in any way by them.

JB: I have no idea of that. We'd have to ask John Turner about that.

I: I don't think he knows. She would've been quite a bit older.

JB: Yeah. Yeah. I wish I could... I don't know. Now the big...biggest collection I have of Mae's is actually her wildflower pictures.

I: Oh! Well, alright. That's what I was talking about.

JB: Okay. She did make a study. ____ But the... Yeah, she won a lot of ribbons, especially Union County Fair and stuff, the pictures of flowers.

I: Were most of those tinted by your mother?

JB: Oh yeah. Yeah.

I: You have some of those?

JB: Yeah.

I: Oh good. Whole banks of wildflowers or did she focus on one or two?

JB: No. Specific ones. Yeah, she'd... She seldom took... Oh, she'd go back and take photographs, say, of the garden, you know, the garden that used to be at Ed Stearns' place. They had a big garden with all those kinds of flowers. And my mother'd tint those up. I never... I don't recall any pictures of, say, going to a, you know, a big nursery or somewhere would ____.

I: Do you think she photographed animals of any ____?

JB: Occasionally. The... They have a classical picture of Minnie...her name Minnie McDaniels over in Cove, a big somethin'...a cow...a famous cow that was had a...great picture, but it was put in on a postcard and I have that. Oh, there's dogs... One of the... The notebook I'm tryin' to fill on Mae she had a picture of two donkeys...donkeys together, little tiny burros or donkeys. Then she put out a postcard, it's a famous postcard. I think she did dozens of them. It says on it, "When will she... When shall we three get together again?" Sometimes you have to think a while. [laugh]

I: Now that suggests then, if she photographed animals she was looked for a humorous animal.

JB: It might've been. She was... She was very humorous, you know.

I: That also would be the kind of animal picture that would sell back then, I suppose.

JB: I might be. Yeah. I don't... Yeah. And, you know, she was also in the women's group here. They put on plays. And so she would always boss the plays, the man's part, minister, a logger, she was a logger. I've got pictures of her in all these different get-ups of being a logger. She'd do black face. Fiddle and... Play the fiddle as a black face musician. Some of the ____.

I: Yes. Certainly is.

JB: I forget. Mabel Dotey wrote this play called "Barbara Fritchie's Frontier" ____ at the library. Mae played a logger in that, I think. [laugh] She was a minister and...

I: Are you aware of her efforts to extend her reputation in any way beyond Union County?

JB: No. I'm not aware of that. She copyrighted her pictures, I know. She copyrighted all these, especially these... She did take some early animal pictures that she copyrighted, too. Gaggles of kittens and dogs and gaggles of chickens. She had quite a few of those, come to think of it. I know one of 'em says it's copyrighted in 1914. But the flower pictures were all copyrighted 1941.

I: Do you think that worked to her advantage as far as sales were concerned?

JB: They have. 'Cause she entered those... A lot of those were entered in the county fairs and things. ____

I: What other county fairs besides Union County?

JB: Oh. She never branched out beyond La Grande that I know of. I know the Rotary Club had some kind of an art show that she won a ribbon or ____ Rotary show. So I'm not familiar... She'd enter her things in the various events around here, but I've known her entering 'em outside of this area.

I: Isn't that a little surprising?

JB: I suppose so. Come to think of it, if she's forty-something when she moved to La Grande, she didn't have a very long professional life left. She finally had to give up photography somewhere 1955 to 1960 and she went into the magazine business, selling magazines. I think in those days, in the last ten years maybe there, she didn't do much photography but concentrated on selling magazines.

I: You mean house to house solicitation?

JB: Oh no. She... She set up her car, you know, her car's from the 1950s...or '40s, had Mae Stern's Photography on the big rim on the back. In the '50s...in '55 Mae Stern's Magazine Agency and she had a lot of these friends she'd just call 'em up and say, "Do you want to renew this?" or they'd they call her and say, "I need a subscription."

I: Would she also go around to store and stock the shelves?

JB: I don't think so. Not that I know of.

I: That's what I think of when I think of magazine agency.

JB: Uh-huh.

I: You have arrangements with various drugstores all around the valley, you go around every week and fill in the magazines.

JB: I doubt she did that. I don't know. She may have, but I'm unaware of that, that she that. It's an interesting thought. I hadn't even thought of that.

I: Do you think that the agency for her meant she just sold to individuals?

JB: Yeah. Yeah. Especially all her lady friends I think, they all bought from her.

I: And what's your inference about why she quit photography? Getting old and tired?

JB: I think so. You know, she just physically kind of unable to go out. I don't know when she gave up the camera with the big black hood over it. 'Cause even in her studio here she'd focus on brown glass, you know, then put in the film holder and aim, cock it and then develop the...the lenses that had that pressure, the air pressure thing to click it.

I: She never had an Argus or an old 35mm camera as far as you know?

JB: I think later on she got some kind of a camera like that, but I think it was just for personal use. I don't think she did it for professional use.

I: What do you think she would think about digital photography?

JB: Oh, she'd be really excited about that. I'll bet ya. Yeah.

I: Why? What would... What would appeal to her about it?

JB: Just the...the creative...what you could do with 'em. Of course you'd have to get in the computer run modification of 'em. She'd probably... Well, if she were twenty-years old when all this came out I'd bet she'd really jump into it with both feet. She was a very creative person. Very...always, you know, wanted to know things. I bet she'd do real well.

I: You've obviously looked at hundreds, maybe thousands, of her photographs of all kinds, is that correct?

JB: Yes. Whatever...

I: At this point could you...[end tape]