

VERNON AINSWORTH

Union County resident for 48 years

AN ORAL HISTORY



Interviews in 1972-76
at his home in Santa Barbara CA

Interviewer: Merrill Ainsworth

UNION COUNTY, OREGON HISTORY PROJECT

2004

(revised from 2002)

UNION COUNTY, OREGON HISTORY PROJECT
An Affiliate of the Oregon Historical Society

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In collaboration with Eastern Oregon University
Cove Improvement Club History Committee
Elgin Museum & Historical Society
Union Museum Society

Purposes

To record & publish oral histories of long-time Union County residents
&
To create a community encyclopedia

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Preface

Much of the history of a place is stored in the memories of people who have lived there. Their stories may be told to family members, but, unless someone makes a special effort to record these stories, they become lost to future generations.

Each of the historical societies in Union County, Oregon has begun to make that effort. Tape recordings exist in several locations, some of them transcribed in written form, others not. A more ambitious and thorough effort seemed necessary so that more of the oral history of Union County could be captured and preserved.

The Union County, Oregon History Project, begun in 2002, is making that more ambitious effort. One of its principal purposes is to collect as many oral histories of older Union County residents as possible and to make them available in both taped and written form. This edited transcript is part of the series of oral histories to be produced by that project.

About the Interviews and This Edited Version

The interviews with Vernon Ainsworth took place at his son's home in Santa Barbara CA. At age 77, he appeared to be healthy and vigorous, mentally and physically.

The interviewer was his son, Merrill Ainsworth; he completed several interviews in 1972 to 1976. (See Introduction, p. 1, for further explanation.)

Heather Pilling's full transcription (available for research purposes) presents the literal contents of both interviews. The edited version presented here differs from the literal transcription in the following characteristics:

- reorganization of content
- deletion of some extraneous comments
- omission of false sentence starts and other normal speech fillers that detract from readability
- normalization of pronunciation and grammar in conformity with standards of written English.

VA designates Vernon Ainsworth's words, *I* the interviewer's.

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Introduction

by Merrill Ainsworth,
son of Vernon Ainsworth

I am of the fourth generation of the seven generations of my family. I was born June 28th, 1919 in La Grande, Oregon. This transcript is the result of a series of conversations with my father, Roy Vernon Ainsworth, recorded on tape over the period from 1972 to 1976, one year before his death. His memory was acute and accurate except perhaps with slight exaggeration in some of his fishing stories.

The excerpts included in this transcript cover only the parts of my father's life that pertain to Union County, whereas the complete set of tapes covers family immigration from England, the move west to Utah and Idaho and then the move to Oregon from Idaho, the years of the Great Depression, hunting and fishing episodes, interesting happenings during Dad's career with the Union Pacific Railroad, and a summation of family history up to the present time.

I offer my father's oral history to the Union County, Oregon History Project as a part of their effort to capture as much of this region's history as possible.

Antecedents of the 20th Century Ainsworth Family

VA: Your granddad, Joseph Ainsworth, was born January in 1848 in England in a little town called Woodgreen. He came to Utah when he was fifteen-and-a-half years old by wagon train. They were coming out with the Latter-day Saints group. (They were converted to the L.D.S. faith in England.) During the trip from the East coast to Salt Lake, their mother got sick, died, and was buried on the trail. Your granddad took it on himself to be the provider and everything for three little kids.

After knocking around and doing some logging and helping to build the Union Pacific Railroad up to Promontory Point, he decided the best thing they could do was to go out and homestead some of the land the good Lord had put here in this earth. So they took a light-spring wagon and one saddle horse in the spring 1877 or '78 and went to a little town, which was later named Carey, Idaho.

The Family Move from Idaho to La Grande

I: How did they happen to leave that part of the country?

VA: My mother had arthritis badly, and Uncle Jim's wife had passed away. After the doctor recommended a different climate, my father decided the best thing for us to do was move to a lower altitude. We were at five or six thousand feet.

I: When was this?

VA: In 1907 we left there.

I: So they had been there how many years?

VA: About twenty-five or thirty years. And we moved then to La Grande, Oregon.

I: How did they pick out that place?

VA: Franklin S. Bramwell had been up in that country and became acquainted with Dad and Mother; he recommended that they come there. He had been there two or three times, hunting and fishing in Wallowa, and had become a very good friend of the family. It was possibly some of the best fishing country in the world and possibly is today.

I: Tell me about the move to La Grande.

Operating a Fruit Orchard

VA: Franklin S. Bramwell had always liked to raise fruit, so my dad bought a fruit orchard in May Park [in northeast part of La Grande]--twenty-seven acres, I think. Part of it was in young orchard and part in old orchard.

I: What kind of trees?

VA: Mostly apples, though we had some pears and cherries. People came from far and wide in the summertime to buy fruit. I might tell you a little interesting thing that happened. Three girls and their mother lived up above us and came to buy fruit. When they got their fruit, the mother couldn't find her \$10 gold piece. In about a week, while I was gathering up some pears for pig feed, lo and behold, I picked up a pear and there was that \$10 gold piece. A pear had fallen down and hit it, knocking it into the dirt. We kept the orchard pretty well mulched and cultivated for apples, so the dirt was soft. When I found that gold piece and picked it up,

of course I knew who it belonged to. She got her money back.

I: How big a community was La Grande at the time?

VA: About fifteen hundred to two thousand. Very small. There were no paved streets and only a few board sidewalks. The mud got ten or twelve inches deep past Adams Avenue. Oh, that was a mess.

I: What was the situation on the apples? Where were they sold or were they shipped out of there?

VA: Most of them went to Great Britain, France, Germany.



May Park orchard, early 20th c.
Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

I: Where did they go from La Grande?

VA: To Portland and then loaded on ships. I didn't know they didn't raise many apples in Europe.

I: How old were you, Dad, when you went to work for the railroad?

Vernon, Underage, Goes to Work for the Union Pacific Railroad

VA: I went to work for the railroad in 1916, when I was eighteen. I said I was twenty-one so I could get a job. When the draft came up, I thought I was going to get fired, but they let me work anyway because I'd lied about my age. I really hate to acknowledge that to my grandchildren and great-grandchildren, but it's one of those things a fellow had to fight for in life, I guess.

An Accident in Logging Country

I: Tell me that story about the string of cars that got away with the people aboard.

VA: It was 1907 when George Palmer came to La Grande and built the George Palmer Lumber Company sawmill--a big mill. The Union Pacific had a branch going out of La



Palmer Lumber Co., La Grande, early 20th c.
Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

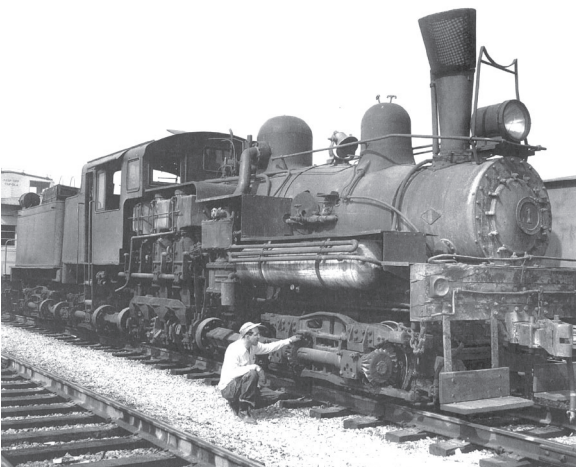
Grande to Joseph. Where the tracks cross the Wallowa River and up about five miles, there was a junction named Vincent. There were sidetracks and Ys there to handle logging trains, U.P. trains, turnaround engines, and so forth. Up another five miles was Rattlesnake Junction, where there was a little flat. The Shay engines pulled the empty cars up there and left them because they went up a really steep grade from there and could only take about six or seven empty cars up the hill.

I: What are Shay engines?

VA: A Shay engine has a gear connected to every set of drive wheels. The steam piston that is mounted on the side runs up and down on a cam; that turns the wheel when the engineer opens the throttle to give it steam.

I: Why were these used in preference to a more conventional type?

VA: They were so much more powerful, though they had to have plenty of sand. If the track was frosty or wet, the engineer flipped a bob to blow a little



Shay engine pulling logs

Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

sand under the front of the wheels; that made them stick to the rails. If the engine hit ice without the sand, the wheels went around really fast and the engine stalled.

Along about August, we had gone out on strike for more money on the Union Pacific Railroad, and I took a job at the logging camp, doing work on the railroad locomotives up there--refueling one locomotive and being a general, all-around flunky. I ran the Shay engine for four days while the engineer was sick, and I fired for another engineer for a few days when his fireman was sick. When we had the big forest fire there, I was the mechanic that had a gasoline speeder and went from one place to another. They filled a trainload of tank cars with water and coupled them together. At the end next to the engine, they had a steam pump for pumping this water out to fight the fire. When those cars were empty, they'd go back down four or five miles, where they were refilled. The empties were set out, and another string that was full came right back up to the fire. That kept going day and night.

I: They were protecting that investment in timber, weren't they?

VA: Oh, yes. The timber was gorgeous: white pine logs five and six feet thick. It made exceptionally fine lumber, which was shipped mostly to eastern places for furniture.

The accident happened in 1922. One afternoon, the train didn't come in, so the railroad office finally got on the phone and learned that a string of cars had gone out. The superintendent got hold of me and wanted me to find out just what the problem was and call him back.

Groceries and other sundries came up to the logging camp from Vincent on a little spur railroad. They were loaded on a flat car, and the people sat down on boxes to ride up to camp, which was about ten miles--a trip that took between forty-five minutes and an hour. The supply train usually had a string of cars pulled from Vincent up to Rattlesnake Junction. At Rattlesnake Junction, they set out these half of these cars and took the other half up to camp.

On the day of the accident, they had set out eight or ten of the cars and left the others on the main line. When the engine came down to couple them, it bumped the cars but the coupling didn't hold. Another attempt to make couplings was useless because they were going too fast. It was about twelve miles downhill from there to Vincent.

One flat car had been cut out and left to sit there. A brakeman named Cantrell, who worked at the camp, with his wife and four little boys, were on that car, heading back to camp, along with nine other people. They'd been to La Grande. He was very concerned about what would happen when they struck the derail at a junction. He could imagine them going end over end off into the water. So when they came to a good bunch of brush, he took his sons, one by one, and threw them on top of the brush because he wanted to save them.

I guess it was about three-and-a-half to four miles from Vincent to where it started uphill again. At that point, they could stop it with the handbrakes, but on a car going sixty or seventy miles an hour handbrakes were no good.

Cantrell had made everybody lie down,

stick their legs over each other, and grab hold of the car decking with their hands. When they hit the derail at that high speed, the car, believe it or not, went over the derail and stayed on the main line tracks. It was going so fast that, when it hit the derail, it had raised up a little and kept going straight on. You'd think possibly the back trucks would have broken, but they didn't. The groceries went over the hillside and into the Wallowa River--maybe a ton of provisions went up in the air and out across the country, beans and coal and canned goods scattered all over the country there--but the adults hung on and were not injured.

I got down there as fast as I dared and looked the situation over. About a mile away, we found one of the boys--dead. His head had hit a rock evidently. We finally found the other three boys by just about dark--also dead. We wrapped the bodies up, took them into camp, and then brought them to La Grande for a funeral the next day. It was the most terrible thing--a lot of tears and a lot of crying at camp. Four little dead boys from about eight to two. The brush was thick along there and he could envision what it was going to be like when the car went over the derail.

I: It was really a knowledgeable decision.

Another Gory Logging Accident

I: Did you ever investigate any other railroad accidents?

VA: No, but we had another bad accident when I was a mechanic taking care of the pumps when we had the big fire in the fall of 1922. It involved a donkey engine--a little steam, stationary en-

gine. Its boiler furnished steam to run three-quarter-inch cables, several hundred feet long, down hills. Loggers hooked the cable onto a log and gave the high sign to the donkey operator, who turned on the engine and dragged these big, old, pine logs up to the track.

They were working where they had a bunch of logs decked down in a canyon. When they hooked one big log and gave the donkey operator the high sign, this log hit a stump and snapped the cable in two. And what do you think it did? It possibly stretched forty feet before it broke, and the cable end cut the man who was hooking the logs completely in two. I brought his body back into camp.

Working an Accident on the Main Line

- I: Stockly number five? What's that, Dad?
- VA: It was about a quarter to nine at night. We were living at 1025 Y Avenue, and you were about three years old then--the finest little fellow that God ever give a man for a son. I was very apt with a cutting torch and had done all the work on snow equipment for the Union Pacific. They called me from the La Grande Union Pacific office, asking me to get on a train that was supposed to leave in fifteen minutes; they said they'd hold the train for me.

A work crew had a dozer stuck in a bridge, and the main line was tied up between Kamela and Pendleton. I called the roundhouse and told them to get two tanks of gas and one of acetylene and to test them out to be sure they were full. I'd have Pauline take me over, and I'd take my equipment, which I knew was with me.

They had to hold the train five or ten minutes for me. It was ten below zero, the snow was deep, and I had to have heavy clothes on, especially on top of the mountain. [Kamela, west of La Grande, is above four thousand feet.] I got everything organized and got in the baggage car.

As we approached the dozer, I could see it wasn't on the main line; it was on the siding. Mr. Giles, the superintendent, had told me that they would have the dozer crew help me. They expected a wrecker to come out of Pendleton about 3:00 a.m. to load this dozer and bring it into La Grande for repair, but they couldn't move it until the lower structure part of it was cut off. Of course, I knew where to cut it to repair it when we got it into the shop. So pretty soon, we pulled up there on #17, the Portland Rose, and we stopped. Ronny said, "Ainsworth, here's where you get off." I said, "It looks kind of bad, doesn't it?" I slipped those tanks out into the six-foot-deep snow, took my stuff, and jumped out up to my chin in snow. I was kind of burned up because they told me the crew would be there to help me.



House on Y Avenue, La Grande, 2003
former home of Ainsworth family
Photo by Eugene Smith

I: Were you alone?

VA: There was nobody else in the canyon, and it was ten below zero. I saw a phone box close by, so I called the superintendent and said, "Just what did you want me to do? Do you want me to go ahead and do the best I can here? There isn't any crew here to help me. They backed this thing off the bridge and got it packed full of snow. It's got to be dug out. I don't know what I can do alone." He said, "That's too bad. You just do the best you can."

There were lots of shovels there, so I shoveled snow for a couple of hours to make a big spot where I could put up my tanks and go to work on cutting the dozer loose.

I: What were you cutting it loose from?

VA: The dozer part of it has a frame on the outside that operates by air and knuckle arms that allow the dozer to go down into the canyon and pick all the snow off the tracks.

I started to cut, and everything went on all right. The heat from the acetylene torch soon melted a lot of snow down underneath. I cut the braces off so that we could take them into the blacksmith shop. They had to be cut off so they wouldn't hang down when the dozer was put onto a train. I was getting along fine and had one side completely ready to go; part of the other side was up to the nose--where the coupling is at the front. I couldn't reach it, so I had to get up there, stand on my head with my feet in the air, and crawl down in to cut off a couple of the braces.

About the time I got them cut off, I heard the biggest roar coming--like all hell was roaring down through the canyon. It was ten below zero, still, and

clear as a bell. I saw a bobcat rolling around out there with eyes shining. I knew the roar was #5, the mail train--a hotshot special.

The mail train had come to a red fusee that had been placed near the track. For an engineer to run past a red fusee is against all rules and regulations. He hoo-hoed with the whistle and applied the brakes. You never saw a scene in your life to equal that one: sparks and hot metal flying off those wheels lit up that whole canyon on both sides. A picture of it would be something to look at. I thought, "Well, I'm in bad. I may have to cut a lot of flat spots on that train, and they may have to limp to Pendleton to transfer everything."

So, self-preservation being the law of nature, I don't know why it came to me so quickly, but I grabbed this red fusee, ran around to the other side of the dozer, and stuffed it way back in the snow as far as I could. Then I lit my torch, laid it down, and cut the oxygen down a little. Little red sparks were flying off it.

The engineer backed up, looked at it, and said, "What's the idea of red fusee?" "What do you mean red fusee?"



Fusee, used by railroaders to signal emergencies to oncoming train

Photo by Eugene Smith

I've got nothing here but an acetylene torch. If you can't tell the difference between a red fusee and an acetylene torch, you better get into Dr. Bouvey [a physician in La Grande] and have your eyes tested!" We argued for a little, as two men will, until I said, "The best thing you can do, Mister, is get the hell out of here with that train or you're gonna be in bad." He hoo-hoed and away the train went.

The crew came at about 3:30. I had the dozer ready to pick up and put on a flat car. While I went in to La Grande, the crew took care of my stuff. When I went in, the cook fixed me a big breakfast. I crawled in the sack, and they woke me up at 7:30, back in La Grande, ready to go to work.

I: Did you ever hear any more from the engineer?

VA: No. The next morning I went right to work at the shop; I didn't go home. I had my sleep and a good feed, so I went to work. I got to thinking at about 10:00, "Suppose that fella makes the case that that was a red fusee and he gets me drawn in because of it." So I decided I ought to talk to Mr. Giles, the superintendent, and give him the



Engine maintenance crew at La Grande shop, 1946
l. to r. Otto Gerber, Jim Ainsworth (Vernon's brother), Don Ainsworth (Vernon's son), Vernon Ainsworth

Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

picture of things. Giles had indirect charge of the trainmen and enginemen. I got a hold of Mr. Giles and asked if he could give me a few minutes of his time, that I had something very important to discuss with him from last night. "Sure. Come right over Vern." So I went over and told him the story of the red fusee. I've never saw a superintendent of the railroad laugh so much in my life. Days later, he called me up and told me that he'd never heard a word about the red fusee from the engineman. So that kind of ended that.

A Memorable Depression-era Incident

I: Tell me about that bad night at Huntington.

VA: It happened during the Great Depression of 1929 to about 1937; the worst period was from 1929 to 1933. People lost their homes and their bank accounts, including me. The Union Pacific was fighting to keep things in operation, and in October, 1931 they decided to readjust their operation to curtail expenses. They moved the maintenance operation from La Grande to Huntington. That meant La Grande wasn't doing any of the work on engines. They were running from Huntington to Reith, right through La Grande.

I went to Huntington and took nine boilermakers and two sets of boiler washers so we could wash on a twenty-four-hour basis there. The first year at Huntington I worked days as boiler foreman.

The Depression kept getting tighter and tighter, so in October, 1932 they abolished the night foreman's job at

Huntington and assigned those duties to the boiler foreman. The boiler foreman went on nights. Everything went along pretty well. We were only running about two freight trains east and two west a day, besides the passenger trains and the mail train. I'm leading up to the story of the worst night that I believe I ever spent in my life.

The foremen in those days worked twelve-hour shifts. Adding the time to turn over his work over to the other foreman, we usually put in twelve-and-a-half to thirteen hours a day. The Union Pacific was a hell of a good place to work, but they didn't have any respect for young human flesh if you could take it, and you had to be tough to take it.

One night I came to work as usual. Thermometers in the roundhouse and outside showed that it was ten below, and a forty-mile-an-hour wind was blowing. The sagebrush was being broken off, and the sand and the dirt and the snow were blowing in through the railroad yard. I could hardly stand up against the wind.

The Portland Rose was due in at 9:10. So I set the engine out--#3216--which was to cut in to go east at Huntington. The #5407 brought the train in that night, eleven cars loaded with two or three hundred people asleep. I had called an extra hostler [i.e., someone who takes charge of locomotives in roundhouse territory] that night because I wasn't going to send an engine out without somebody on there to see that all the heaters, injectors, feed-water pumps, and steam heat were working.

I: Were you afraid they'd freeze up?

VA: Right. Our regular hostler took out the #3216, which was a coal burner, like all the other locomotives that operated east of Huntington at that time.

I: This was before the days of oil burners, wasn't it?

VA: Yes. We had oil burners only from La Grande to Portland. I instructed him to stay there and instruct the engineman about the heaters--to be sure that they were left on because it was terribly cold. There was steam heat in the

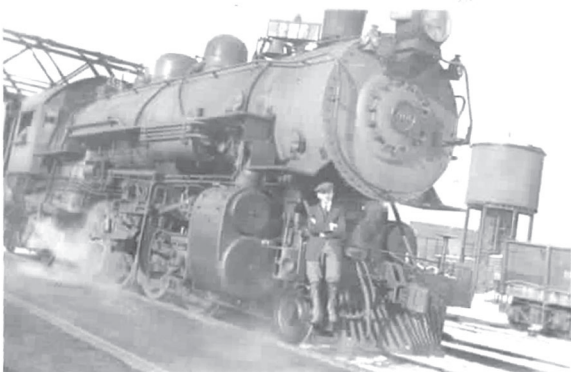


Union Pacific yard at La Grande (roundhouse in foreground),
ca. 1920s, later moved to Huntington OR
Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

cabs of these engines, which made it comfortable with a temperature around seventy-five or eighty degrees. So what does Mr. Engineer do but turn off the steam heat. Unbeknownst to me, when the train pulled in, we cut #5407 off and put #3216 on the train. We couldn't get any steam heat through those cars; it would be a disaster if we couldn't get the steam heat through. So I always kept #5407 standing by on nights like that, just in case I had to cut the engine off and put another engine on to keep the train warm.

I had a big, old sheepskin coat on, turned up around my neck, my cap on, two pairs of gloves, long johns, and wool pants. Brother, I want to tell you I needed every bit of clothes I had.

We backed #3216 in on the train, and we couldn't get any steam heat through. We fussed around for a few minutes. The lead carman on the second shift said, "I know what's the matter." We always kept oily waste and a long rod arrangement that we clamped the waste on with and lighted it to thaw out any pipe. He stuck this oily waste under the cab of the engine, and, sure enough, he broke that pipe loose and the steam came through. About



Steam locomotive of the type
Vernon worked with
Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

that time, the engineer and firemen came out of the cab. I told them to get back in. What I should have done was to fire both of them and call another crew. But I didn't because I was afraid it would create unnecessary delay. It was a pleasure to me when I could see those spinner valves open up on that train and the steam line going through that train. If you froze a train up and busted all those pipes, those coaches would have been tied up for weeks before they could have been put back in service.

When we finally got everything in operation, the train pulled out, and I started back to the roundhouse office. I was going by the rip track [i.e., a siding track] and noticed a boxcar with the door open about six inches. I thought I heard a baby cry. I said to myself, "Oh, good Lord no! That can't be right on a night like this." I stood there, and, sure enough, I could hear that baby crying. I pulled the boxcar door open and threw my flashlight beam in there. I always carried a good three-cell flashlight that threw a light for a couple hundred feet. There in one corner of the boxcar, I saw a few old blankets, covered with coal dirt, several little kids, and a man and his wife--all curled up together. I asked the man, "What are you doin' here?" He said, "I'm trying to get to Portland. If I can get to Portland, I'll be all right. I have a brother there that's expecting me." I said, "Man, you can't stay in here tonight. This car is cut out for wheels [i.e., repair of the wheels]. She'll be here for a couple of days." I thought, what in the world can I do with this family?

The Union Pacific maintained an emergency supply room about forty feet square that had steam heat, set close to the barrel room. It had everything

imaginable for supplies, like beds and caboose cushions, which are about four inches thick and six to seven feet long; they made a nice bed to sleep on in an emergency. The day roundhouse foreman and I had keys to this room --the only two people in Huntington with access to this place. Among the other things in there were forty 30-30 carbine rifles and lots of ammunition.

I: What were they needed for?

VA: I expect they had them in there in the days of the Indians, but the Indians were gone now and they just left them there. There were lots of canned goods--beans and soups--and crackers. The eatables were usually changed every year in there to have fresher stuff. I thought, my goodness, I've got to do something with this little family. So it came to my mind as quick as a flash to move them in there even if I got fired, which I fully expected would happen if management found out what I had done. I thought I'd plead my case if it came to that.

So I took it upon myself to gather this little family up. There were six children, the oldest, I think, eleven and the baby about six months. That little baby was just about blue with cold. The other kids had runny noses and were covered with coal dust. It was a pitiful sight to behold. All in the world they had was a half a bottle of milk, frozen solid, and part of a loaf of bread. I told that man, "You come with me now. Let's gather up here." It was maybe fifty yards to the building where we had the emergency supplies. I put him in there, knowing nobody could get in but me and the day foreman, W. C. Johnson, a little, redheaded fellow and a fine man in Huntington.

We didn't have any bathtubs in the

building, but we had a big washbowl and toilet facilities. We went in the emergency supply room, all of them hungry, crying, and whimpering. I went across to the restaurant and got a gallon and a half of good, thick, hot soup; a big box of crackers; four quarts of milk; and seven or eight hamburgers. Hamburgers at that time, believe it or not, cost ten cents apiece, and milk was about eight cents a quart. There were all the dishes they needed in the building.

I told the man and his wife, "Stay in here. I don't want you to go out roaming around or opening doors. Be as quiet as possible."

The next day was Saturday, and there'd be nobody else in the storeroom. The storekeeper didn't work on Saturday. Towards morning, I got another gallon of milk, a dozen hamburgers, a big box of cookies, and a dozen Hershey bars. I told them the Union Pacific wouldn't miss a can of or two of beans or soup; they could warm them on the radiator if they wanted to.

I had told the day roundhouse foreman I didn't want him to go into that room that day and that, in two or three days, I'd tell him the story. He said, "Fine." That was good enough for him. I went in on Saturday evening and saw all those little kids cleaned up as slick as a whistle; the mother and father were cleaned up. It was a beautiful family in a good warm place. The kids' bellies were full of good, warm food.

I: Where had they come from? Did they tell you?

VA: They came from Ohio, but they happened to get in the worst blizzard and coldest night that we had ever witnessed in Huntington.

When Senator King came in that night, he and I sat and discussed it for quite awhile. Senator King was an engineer and a previous senator in the Idaho legislature, who often collected money from fifteen for twenty people around Huntington--fifty cents or a quarter each--and turned it over to me. It was a fund to help hungry people. I think I had \$17 in our kitty. I kept track of everything I spent, and Senator King and I talked it over. I generally put in a \$2 or \$3 a week into the kitty myself because I figured that the Lord was pretty good to me, giving me a good job during the Depression.

We decided the weather was breaking a little bit, and the next day being Sunday, I fixed them up with more nice things to eat and told them that the next night I would buy two tickets for Portland, Oregon. I would come and get them, put them on the train, and head them to Portland in a nice warm car. I did that, and that ends the story. I didn't get in trouble either for what I had done.

I: That's quite a story. Did you ever hear anything more from them?

VA: Not a word. They seemed to be such nice people that something may have happened--probably lost my address, though I had given them my name and address.

I: Did you have other experiences with people in need?

VA: Bums came through Huntington every night on trains. U.P. had a standing order that no bums were supposed to go in the sand house, which had two or three big, coal-burning stoves in it. Sand that had been picked up along the Columbia River by the carload was brought in there and dumped into a

bin. It had to be dried and then blown up into a container some forty or fifty feet high for use on locomotives to sand icy tracks. Every nearly frozen bum that came in wanted to know where the sand house was. One night it was so bad I had that sand house almost double-decked with men and women, regardless of the order against letting them be there.

Fishing in the Glorious Lookingglass River

I: Could we switch now to the Lookingglass River [about twenty miles north of Elgin OR] and your fishing there?

VA: I think that would be a very good subject to explore. It's mostly about fishing and having a good time.

In the 1920s and '30s, the U.P. ran a regular passenger train out of La Grande at 7:00 in the morning and back home at La Grande about 5:00 in the evening. That was a fisherman's paradise--twenty or thirty fishermen every Sunday morning mounting that train. In the afternoon, the engineer picked them up any place along the railroad from the Lookingglass to the mouth of Wallowa Canyon. It was quite a sight--and quite a smell--to see those fisherman in a car. And, of course, I happened to be one of them.

I: I can't believe it!

VA: The Lookingglass runs into the Grande Ronde River at the junction called Lookingglass--a beautiful stream! It came to be called *Lookingglass* because the water was always clear as a crystal. You could look in those big pools and easily see fish in them.

In the fall of 1924, Jess Kerr and I

decided to go five or six miles up the road from Lookingglass. We had the 1923 Chevrolet. Previous to this trip, I had caught a frog, fastened a hook on a piece of skin on his back, put him out on one of the big pools at the falls, and let him swim across. He got about halfway across when a Dolly Varden, or bull trout--either one is a proper name for them--took him.

These fish are scavengers of the streams, especially up in that country. They're beautiful fish, five or six pounds, and they'll eat anything. I have caught them with a small duck, a muskrat, and big frogs--different fishing from other trout. They prefer live bait, grab it, and go down to the bottom with it. I don't know why unless they munch on it a little bit before swallowing it. When one gets hold of your bait, you just let him have it and don't pull on him at all. If you do, you're liable to pull the bait out of his mouth or tear the hook out of the bait. When he swallows it and it gets down in his stomach, you tighten up on him, and, boy, you have a fight.

I wanted to try some of these big holes with mice. Warren Wagoner had a stack of wheat near there that was alive with mice. So I went up to Wagoner's one night, dug around in that straw, and caught twenty-five mice. We put them in a ten-pound lard pail with a screen over the top and little straw and wheat and stuff in there. We could've caught more, but we thought that was plenty of bait for the next morning.

Before daylight, we headed for the Lookingglass. You go up through Elgin, turn off to your left, and circle around till you come over to where there's a little, white schoolhouse that has been in there maybe seventy-five years. Just beyond it is where you

leave the car. A little draw runs east; when you go through, it puts you right in at the falls. We headed in there with our ten-pound lard bucket full of mice. There are three big, clear pools, and the water is ten or twelve feet deep, where it's been coming over the falls for hundreds of years. It's dug out deep holes, and the water is clear as crystal. Brush comes close to the edges. We got in behind the brush, and I dropped in the first one--a mouse hooked with by skin on its back. I let him out gently onto the water. He started swimming across, and, when he did, it looked like the whole bottom of the pool came alive. Those big boys were trying to take him for a ride. Of course, one fish got it. I let him have it for a few minutes, until I was satisfied that he had swallowed. Then I tightened up on him a little and reeled him in.

We fished these three pools from a little bit after daylight to about 11:00. Then we made a pot of coffee, had our sandwiches, cleaned our fish, and were back home in La Grande about 6:00 that evening. We had nineteen of those big boys that run along from eighteen to twenty-six inches long. They're a fine eating fish, too.

I: What did you do with the other six mice?

VA: We lost them somewhere, or we may have pulled on them a little too quickly--getting kind of nervous, you know--and they would let go.

Another trip I made with Uncle Jim and our boys--his number two son, who was about ten, and my number one son--you, Merrill--who was about thirteen years old. We stopped up at the hill where the old log chute was, beyond where you go over to the falls.

We got there early in the morning and packed those young boys with pretty good packs, the same as us. We wanted to go to the old mill on the main Lookingglass, where sometimes the fishing was tremendous. That day it wasn't too good, but we had a wonderful time and caught all the fish we could eat with fried onions, potatoes, and coffee.

It's a funny thing that three or four miles from the old mill there's hardly any water in the Lookingglass, but four or five miles from there it's a big stream of water--the best fishing I ever hit in my life.

I: What happens to the water? Does it go underground?

VA: It goes underground late in the fall, and there isn't any water down there at all. After breakfast the next morning, bright and early, we were going to head up the main Lookingglass to get to this choice fishing place. I had been in there once before, but it's kind of hard to get to on account of the brush and the contour of the land. It's hard to determine exactly where it is. Then it started to rain hard on us. We kept plowing up Brushy Creek, which is on the left. I knew we were wrong, so I started to fish in some of the big pools on Brushy Creek--maybe ten feet wide and twenty feet long--and a caught half a basket of native trout and a few rainbow out of a couple holes there. It kept raining. Finally, we got up to the head of Brushy Creek, and I told Jim I was sure that we were on the wrong track. We had gone on the left side when we should have been on the right. He kept asking his grandson, Don, if he was having a good time. Don said, "Yes." And about the fourth time he asked Don if he was having a good time, the rain running down

around his ears and his neck, Don said, "Hell, no!"

So we had to pull out of there that night. If we had stayed another day, I'd have known where to go to get up on the main Lookingglass. We came back to camp, built a good fire at the old mill, and had lots of feed. The sun came out and we had a good time. The one thing I never will forget from that trip is that we packed you boys in proportion just as heavy as we did ourselves. I was about thirty-three, I imagine, and Uncle Jim was probably forty. You kids ran along the trail with your packs up the trail ahead of us three or four hundred yards, laid your packs down, and started throwing rocks and climbing trees, having a great time. We came along with our tongues hanging out and sweating like troopers.

Now another little story about hunting deer along the main Lookingglass on the east ridge. Jess Kerr and I went into the old mill, left our camping equipment there, and hunted on the east ridge from the main Lookingglass. We hunted early in the morning and saw several does and fawns, but we never did get a chance to shoot a buck. But we had our fishing tackle with us and some good cured angleworms. By *cured* I mean angleworms we had dug and put in grass and grassroots for a full five days. That fizzled all the dirt out of them so they were pink and red and lively as could be. When you put them on the hook, they start to wiggle and Mr. Trout thought they were pretty hot stuff. We figured we only had two hours because the boys were going to have dinner about noon or 1:00, and we had about four or five miles to hike to where the car was. We started fishing, and I'll tell you now I never saw such beautiful rainbow trout in my life. They all looked like they were hatched

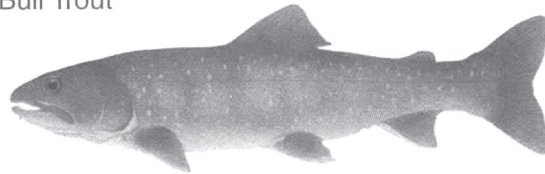
out at the same time--from twelve and a half inches to twelve and three-quarters inches long. It was wonderful. I caught fifty-three in two hours--a nice big basket full of trout. Jess Kerr had thirty-seven, but he had one that was bigger than mine--a bull trout seven teen inches long.

When we got back, we ate boiled potatoes with butter, all the bull trout

we could eat, coffee, and bread and jelly. On the way home, we stopped in Elgin, where I got fifty pounds of ice to preserve our load of fish.

I put those fish down in our basement, took part of that ice and got more ice, and put those fish and ice on the dirt floor with a burlap sack under them, and covered them with an old quilt. We had them off the ice for two

Bull Trout



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