ARIEL BEAN

Union County resident for 80 years

AN ORAL HISTORY

Interviews in June, 2002 & July, 2003
at his home near La Grande OR

Interviewers: Vanessa Clemens & Eugene Smith

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

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UNION COUNTY, OREGON HISTORY PROJECT

An Affiliate of the Oregon Historical Society

A non-profit, tax-exempt corporation formed in 2002

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 Interview and This Edited Version

The interview with Ariel Bean took place at his home in May Park, near La Grande. At age 80, he appears to be healthy and vigorous, mentally and physically.

The interviewers were Vanessa Clemens and Eugene Smith, volunteers with the Union County, Oregon History Project. She completed a one-and-one-half-hour interview in June, 2002, and he completed a one-and-a-half hour interview in July, 2003.

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.

AB designates Ariel Bean's words, *I* the interviews'.

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Union County Native with Roots in Utah

I: How long have you and your family lived in Union County?

AB: I've lived in Union County all my life except for military service and being away at school.

In 1903 or maybe a little earlier, Grandfather Victor E. Bean wanted to move from southern Utah--Richfield, Escalante, and Boulder, where they lived. He came to the Grande Ronde Valley and found that there was a family by the name of Minor, living at Nibley [former town east of La Grande, near Cove], that wanted to move back to Utah. He looked over their livestock and proposed that they trade. He knew what he was getting, but the Minor family didn't know what they were getting back in Utah. They traded livestock, avoiding the freight rates for moving cattle and horses.

When the Beans came, the first place I know of that they settled in was at the top of the Second Street hill [La Grande]. Granddad built the barn, which is still standing there, in part at least.

Experiences with Native Americans

AB: In Utah, Grandma was selling lots of vanilla to the Indians, thinking they were becoming great cake makers and getting a little more civilization. She was shocked to find out they were buying the vanilla because it was high on alcohol content.

My dad was scared by an Indian there on one occasion when he was young. (He was only thirteen when they moved to Oregon.) But after my dad died, my mother and Ruth Shinsel got some kind of thing going with representatives from several Indian tribes here at my mother's home in May Park--a dinner or something. Chief Clarence Burke was one of those from Umatilla, a Round-Up chief [annual rodeo and gathering of Native Americans in Pendleton]. My mother served Parker House rolls. My brother, who was quite young at the time, got interested in how many rolls Chief Burke was eating--twenty-two of them, he claimed. Chief Burke was pretty good-sized. He was quite well acquainted with my Uncle Jeff, who had a feed and bulb store in Pendleton. He got along pretty well with the Indians and they liked him. They came and invited him to their root festival one year. Jeff said, "I'd like to come. I have quite a few extra tulip bulbs that I can bring to the root feed." The Indians kind of smiled at him and said, "You bring pie."

Ariel's Mother: Ellen Storey Bean

I: Tell me about your mother.

AB: My mother's name was Ellen Storey. She was always called Nellie by her friends. She came through here as a three- or a four-year-old in a covered wagon with her foster parents. When she was born in North Ogden, Utah, her mother died not long afterwards; her father, in a sense, gave her to his brother, Sam, and his wife, Polly

Jones. The Jones family claimed my mother. When my dad died, it was the Jones family that came to the funeral in support of my mother. After going to Dayton, Washington, they moved back here and lived on Gekeler Lane. She helped Sam Storey plant the willow trees that grow along Gekeler Lane.

She started school at the Liberty School, that was at the corner of McAlister and Gekeler. Later they moved into Island City and lived in a house that is still there. She walked or took horse and buggy into high school in La Grande. She said Island City was an island in those days. You can still see the channel through the golf course. I think she said there were four saloons in town, one on each corner of the crossroads. She went to school with some of the Kiddles. She had an Indian pony that would outrun almost any other horse. The key word was *clat-a-wa*; she had learned to lean forward along the horse's neck and yell that word, though she didn't know what it meant. I found out that *clat-a-wa* was Chinook jargon for *to go,* and that's what the horse did.

She also used to run the bases for the Kiddle boys and some of the others in Island City when they played baseball because apparently she could run like a deer. I didn't inherit that.

Early Childhood Experiences

I: What were some of the conditions of your early life?

AB: The first job I ever had was driving a slip [i.e., a platform made of boards] in the hay fields when I was between ten and twelve. I didn't have to harness the horses. I got ten cents a day; the men who were loading the hay and doing the stacking got a dollar a day plus board and room.

I: What do you remember about health-care needs in your family while you were a child?

AB: If anything happened, we took care of it at home. For instance, I was getting dressed by the heater stove one morning. After taking off my pajama pants, I managed to back up against the stove. The cure was a raw potato poultice; it seemed to work. Mustard plasters were cures, and there was something called Denver mud that was applied to the chest. I have a spot on

Ariel at about age 5
Photo courtesy of Ariel Bean

my tongue where I fell and bit it. That left a bump there that I've had all my life. We didn't go to a doctor very often, even to get anything sewed up.

I: Did you go through the flu epidemic, like so many did?

AB: Yes. We had the flu when we moved out into May Park [area east of La Grande] back in 1936 in that bad winter. We were snowbound there for three weeks. My dad and I both had the flu.

I: What are some of the particularly happy times you had in your family? Christmas? Birthdays?

AB: I don't remember much about birthdays--except getting older. One of the Christmases when we lived in the 900 block on 3rd Street, I think I got up at 2:00 in the morning and went down and opened up my presents. When everybody else came down to the Christmas tree, I was asleep on the davenport. I couldn't wait. Probably the story I should tell about Christmas, though, was when we lived out there at the Five Acres on 18th Street. The Log Cabin Grocery used to be on the corner of Adams. For some reason, at the age of five or six I wanted an axe for Christmas. My dad was a con artist of a kind: he kept telling me long before Christmas that, in order to figure out the size of axe I should have, Santa Claus would have to come in and measure my foot. If I opened my eyes to see him measuring, I wouldn't get anything. Dad had some sleigh bells; when those rang on Christmas Eve, my sister and I popped into bed. Before long, I could feel somebody reaching under the covers and something that felt like a ruler was placed against the bottom of my foot. The next day there was an axe under the tree big enough that Paul Bunyan would have liked to have it. It was too much for me. Somewhere between our move to a farm on Catherine Creek and back to town, the axe got lost. I don't know what happened to it.

Ariel's Father: George Ariel Bean

I: What can you tell me about your dad?

AB: He went to high school here in La Grande. He and his older brother Vern were interested in athletics. When they got in high school, they both played football. Vern played center and my dad was one of the tackles; Dr. J. L. Ingle was the other tackle. They had a hard time talking their dad into coming to a football game. I think the first time he came it was about the time they were carrying somebody out.

Football was a little different in those days. My dad said that men up to the age of twenty-six could still play for the high school. He was quite a bit younger than that when he was playing. One time they had a game against Pendle-ton. A fellow by the name of Trace Baker, if I remember correctly, lined up opposite my dad and said, "I'm gonna get you, kid." On the next play, they carried Trace Baker off the field. My dad always got blamed for it, but Doc Ingle was the one that had done the dirty work; he laughed about it all the rest of his life.

Somebody lined up against Vern on one occasion, growled at him, and said, "You got Mormon blood in you, haven't ya?" The next play Vern said back to him, "Yes, I have, but it's not coming out of me like it's coming out of you."

It's a wonder that my grandparents raised their family; that's all I can say. They farmed for a while outside of North Powder. I have a picture showing all the boys in the family lined up with the boots and shovels and Granddad at the head of the line.

They made life a little tough for one of their brothers-in-law. Ethel was their older sister. The easy way to get up to the place in those days was not to go up the 2nd Street hill [in La Grande] but to go over a block or two and come up past where there was a greenhouse. It was an easier progression. There were shrubs and trees along the path, and Vern and George Ariel Bean would hide out along the path and listen to the conversation as June Andrew was courting their sister Ethel. The next day they would find occasion to repeat that in front of Ethel and their mother, with embellishments of course.

Early La Grande Experiences

I: What do you remember about the La Grande of half a century or more ago?

AB: When I was very small--in fact, I think, before my sister Barbara showed up--there used to be a noodle parlor upstairs across the street from where the Granada Theater is [on Adams Avenue]. My folks liked to go in there occasionally and have some of China Mary's noodles. They told me that, while they were having noodles, China Mary took me back in the kitchen. I don't remember much about it, but eventually the building that included China Mary's was destroyed by a fire. Later on, the bank [Wells Fargo] was built there.

The Liberty Theater was close to the old post office, which is now the city hall. My memory of the old post office is that it didn't grade down into the alley behind. There was a set of mangers and hitching rails along the street

Adams Avenue, La Grande, 1920s (facing west)
La Grande Hotel in distance
Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

there for horses. When my dad was a rural mail carrier, the winters of 1928 and ’29 were rather severe, with a lot of snow. We spent that winter living at 1002 3rd Street, which was Grandmother Bean’s home; we had an apartment upstairs.

My uncle Grant had the house on the corner of 3rd and K, which had a barn behind it. That’s where my dad kept the horses. He took three and left before daylight in his mail wagon, with two horses hooked in tandem at the front and one trailing. They broke the snow and went out on what was then Route 2 to deliver the mail. This wagon had a glass front, with slots for the reins to come through, and sliding doors that were glassed in on the sides so that he could sit inside comparatively sheltered. To have any kind of heat, he had to take a hot brick, though I don’t know that he ever did. This was the way he carried mail that winter.

I can remember going across the street from where we lived and climbing up over the snow at the side of the street. It probably was two to three feet deep out there on the lot where Sylvan Rasmussen built the house on the corner of J and 3rd, which is across from 1002 3rd Street.

Bean Senior’s Mail Delivery Routes

AB: The Route 2 mail route started on Cove Avenue, went down Willow Street, and around toward the foothills to Gekeler Lane. It went along Gekeler Lane to McAlister, stayed on McAlister, and came across back to Foothill Road. It continued out to the corner of the valley past the present Ladd Canyon overpass on the freeway. Then it headed down toward the airport, went across the south end of the airport, and wound its way back onto Cove highway. I think it turned off on Peach Lane and came back in on Buchanan Lane (then Cove Avenue). People on the right side of the delivery route got their mail a whole lot later than the ones just across the street.

Route 1, which Dad carried through part of the Depression and during World War II, started out at the post office and went to Riveria School [north side of La Grande]. The first customers were over toward where the stockyards used to be--at Y Avenue and a little bit past 1st, where the railroad used to go down to the old Bowman-Hicks mill. Then it went along Harrison on up to Perry--Lower and Upper Perry [west of La Grande]--and back down to Blackhawk Trail, following that. It came in around the Sugar Addition on Russell, Cherry, and Z; past the park [Riverside Park]; down Fruitdale Lane (then Chandler Lane); and backtracked to the Mt. Glen Road close to Leffel Corners. The route followed the Mt. Glen Road all the way to Hunter Road and out to the butte and Woodell Lane.

The return trip began, I think, at McDonald Road, past Conley warehouse, and through Island City. There was no delivery in Island City then because they had their own post office in the back of a store. Then it went into May Park and finished up close to what was then the Mt. Emily Mill, now Boise Cascade. For a long time, my dad

traveled a hundred miles a day, six days a week, delivering mail.

I: How long did that take him a day?

AB: He did Route 1 in the morning and Route 2 in the afternoon, so he was doing probably an eight-hour day. It would depend. At Christmas time, he took the back seat out of the car and loaded it with packages because there wasn't any UPS [i.e., United Parcel Service] in those days. He went to Perry to deliver that load, came back, and loaded up again. He might come back to the post office to get more packages before he could finish up Route 1. Then he'd have to load up for Route 2 the same way. He also carried both Portland papers, the *Oregonian* and the *Journal*, as well as *The Observer* [La Grande's newspaper] and all of the catalogs.

I substituted for him and for George McCoy at various times in the '40s. The little chickens used to come in by Railway Express and be delivered by the post office. I delivered chickens. That's the way things were handled at that time.

Toots Garity took care of all the parcel post delivery. There wasn't any UPS, so he took care of all of the packages that were too big for a route carrier, who walked, to carry. He also took the route carriers' mail, which had been bundled and routed in the post office, to drop boxes around town to which he and the city carrier had the keys.

The city carriers walked everywhere. They didn't have any fancy mail car to take them around every place. When the carrier had done a certain amount of his route, he went to the drop box. If he had a lot of letters, he put them in there for safekeeping while he got the next bundle of mail out and delivered it.

David B. Stoddard worked the north side of town, and at one time he had a horse and buggy of a sort to use for delivering. People that talked about it said the horse knew the route as well as David B. did--where to stop every time and wait while he did this route. The carriers worked five-and-a-half days, including a Saturday morning delivery.

We had a Model-T at one time and then graduated to a Model-A pickup. That was before I had anything to do with delivering the mail in either direction, as I recall. As rural mail carrier, a car was a necessity. The roads weren't paved in those days; they were gravel, if you were lucky. Dad found that at about thirty thousand miles was time to start over with a new one. So he made car payments most of his life.

I: Wasn't the post office paying him in any way for the use of his car?

AB: They paid him mileage, barely enough for gas, oil, and maybe tires. They didn't pay for the car; it was his car.

I: I think we would say now that he was being ripped off.

AB: In a sense, you could say that because, when the Depression hit, they lowered his wages $500 with the promise he'd

get it back when things got better. He was still working for the post office when he died in 1954 and never got it back. The thing was that he had a job when a lot of people didn't during the Depression, although, when the Depression hit, they cut his salary $500 a year, promising that they'd give it back when things got better, but it never did get better as far as he was concerned. His salary never was restored. But he had a job, and a lot of people didn't.

In 1954 my dad went into La Grande Clinic, had a complete physical, and the doctor told him he was good for another twenty years. In fact, he lasted long enough to get down to the old post office and sign a pay voucher and that's where he died--the day of his physical. Somehow his activities had weakened a chamber of the heart.

Work for the Railroad

I: Am I right in thinking that one of the early jobs you had in La Grande was with the railroad?

AB: I worked for the railroad in 1942-- out on the rip track.

I: What's a rip track?

AB: This is where they brought in all of the boxcars that they were remodeling so that they would be able to haul heavier freight.

I: Is a rip track like a siding track, then?

AB: It was a siding that was open on the sides, but it had a long roof over it.

I: Where was that in relation to the present La Grande depot building?

AB: This was north of the depot. At one time, there was a walkway that went across the tracks there near the west end of the depot, and the rip track and other maintenance buildings were north of the depot.

I: How did you happen to get this job?

AB: I went and asked for it.

I: What did that involve?

AB: I don't remember who was in charge, but they were looking for help there. In fact, they brought a bunch of fellows over from Nampa to work what they called carmen or car toads, to work in these various areas. The roundhouse was where they did engine maintenance that didn't involve tearing down the boilers. They did that over in the back shop. There were a lot of fellows working there that year.

I: When you applied for that job, what skills did you bring to it? Just strength?

Union Pacific Railroad yard in La Grande, 1940s (rip track in foreground)

Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

AB: Muscle.

I: Yes, but it required a certain amount of skill, didn't it, from what you've described?

AB: I was a carman's helper and worked under his direction. Our job was to burn the rivets out of the boxcar's spider and then ream out the holes for larger rivets. This was to strengthen the car to be pulled in a longer train.

I: Please explain how the spider worked.

AB: A box car had a spider in each end. It was a square, steel, boxlike structure, which bore the weight of the car it connected to the trucks [i.e., the wheel unit]. What tied the trucks and the car together was a round, two inches or so piece of steel which fit up into the spider and down into the plate on the trucks. When the box car was jacked up off the trucks, this metal bar could be lifted up out of its hole in the plate. This is all that held the car body and the running gear together. It probably had a proper name, but in railroadese, it was called a *bull prick*.

I: Were most of these box cars twenty-five or more years old?

AB: Goodness only knows what their age might have been, but they needed upgrading. They took up part of the floor in each end so we could get in there and work. When the necessary parts had been replaced, they were usually repainted and sent back out on the road. The point was to allow them to haul a heavier load without coming apart, I guess.

I: Did you ever find out why La Grande was chosen for that kind of repair?

AB: We used to be a division point on the railroad system. In other words, the road crews ran from about Nampa to here and then from here on west. They figured that by the time the engineer had made that run, he'd put in a day's work. Beyond that, in the days when they were running steam engines, the fireman was probably pretty much worn out from shoveling coal before he'd made that trip.

I: But repairing boxcars seems like a different thing from just running trains. Was La Grande so well-equipped for making repairs that that's why it was chosen?

AB: They had the roundhouse for engines. They had the back shop which they could do the boiler work in. They had the rip track which could do this. In other words, it was a division point. All that was moved over to Hinkle [approximately thirty miles west of Pendleton] eventually.

I: Could it be that at that time La Grande was made a division point--and thereby brought work here--in order to help support the community?

AB: I don't know about that. All I know is that they figured it was a day's work for the road crews when they came from Idaho or from the west to La Grande. Furthermore, to get in and out of here a big train with boxcars had to have helper engines to get over the grade. To the east, trains have to climb from here until they get past Baker and

into Pleasant Valley [approximately ten miles east of Baker City], where they begin to go downhill, though from about Farewell Bend they need help all the way up another hill. It's the same thing going west over the summit of the Blue Mountains until they start down into Umatilla County.

I: How long were you working at this freight-car-repair job?

AB: I was there just that summer of 1942, trying to make money so I could go to school; I needed to go away to get the courses I wanted. I needed a lot of physics and math because I wanted to get into the Air Corps and learn to fly.

Impressions of Co-workers on the Railroad

I: While you were working there that summer, did you get to know the other men fairly well?

AB: Yes, but that was a long time ago and my memory's shot for the most part.

I: I wondered if you could give me some sense of what these men's attitudes were, what they talked about, and how much you respected them.

AB: Respect was one thing. First of all, it was a dirty place to work. Everybody wore an extra set of overalls because we couldn't sit down anywhere without getting grease or soot or dirt on us. And they weren't well-known for their genteel language.

I: That's what I suspected, yes.

AB: I didn't work with very many of them. The guy I was assigned to was one of those that had moved over from Nampa. His best buddy was in the soup because he'd been chasing some woman here when they came over; then, when he moved his wife over, that caused complications. They ended up living next door to each other. For a young kid trying to behave himself, that's not too much of an example.

Brothels, Taverns, Restaurants, and Barbershops in La Grande

I: My understanding is that during that period there were a good many prostitution services available in La Grande for railroad and mill workers. Did you observe that that was the case?

AB: A kid that I was going to school with worked for the laundry, and he said he could tell them apart by whatever they turned in for laundry. That's all I know about it.

I: Tell who apart?

AB: The prostitutes.

I: Tell them apart from respectable women, you mean?

AB: No. He could tell the prostitutes apart --this one from that one. That's all I know about it.

I: OK. I guess we'll just leave that to speculation.

AB: It could deserve a lot of speculation, I suspect.

I: Were you aware that there were brothels all along Jefferson Avenue?

AB: The only ones I was aware of, I think, were on Fir Street--upstairs.

I: The building that's still there at the corner of Fir and Jefferson?

AB: It's still there. In fact, I think the upstairs entry is right next to the alley, across the street from the old Salvation Army building.

I: Did it have any sort of sign or red light?

AB: I don't know whether it had one or not.

I: What did you observe about the taverns that many railroad men probably frequented?

AB: I don't know a thing about them. I didn't frequent them.

I: I didn't expect you would.

AB: They wouldn't let me in anyway, I was underage.

I: You were about eighteen then?

AB: That summer I was nineteen.

I: What I'm aiming at here is whether you perceived La Grande as a fairly wide-open town at that time.

AB: I don't have any idea. I was living out of town and stayed home at night for the most part, unless there was a ballgame or something. I worked from 7:30 to 3:30, and, since we had a garden, there was always stuff to do at home, too.

I: Sure. There were some eatery places, weren't there?

AB: Yes. There was a bunch of those. The Yellow Dog was a little one on the same side of Fir as Zimmerman's, down two or three doors; it was a narrow, walk-in place.

I: With a name like Yellow Dog, I'd expect it to be for men.

AB: Then there was the Lavender Lunch.

I: That sounds more refined.

AB: It was on Depot Street across from the old J. C. Penney building.

I: Wasn't that the Sommer Hotel Building?

AB: I don't know if that was part of the building or not. That was a little fancier place.

I: Do you remember how it looked?

AB: No, I don't. Good night, you're asking me about something sixty years ago!

I: Some of these details last. I've heard several people mention it, but nobody has described it.

AB: The Green Parrot Grill was on Adams Avenue, part of the Foley Hotel.

I: Do you remember that one better?

AB: There were shade trees in front of it,

which disappeared eventually. It had booths and, as I recall, waiters. You could get a pretty good meal for $1, if I remember right. But high school kids didn't eat out all that much.

Across the street from the old high school--the southeast corner of 4th and M Avenue--Mrs. Niederer had a beauty parlor in one part of it, and in another she sold nickel hamburgers when we were in high school. We got the bun, the meat, and she may have furnished ketchup and mustard--all for a nickel.

I: Is that about as close as you could come to a fast food restaurant at that time?

AB: Yes, I think so. We went over there during noon hour and have burgers. Quite a few kids did that every once in a while.

I: What do you remember about barbershops in La Grande?

AB: Barbershops were scattered all over town.

I: You patronized them, didn't you?

AB: Yes, once upon a time. I used to get a haircut for a quarter. They used to shave a lot of fellows, too. There were always hot towels, and they finished up with witch hazel. Always a big bunch of all kinds of colored hair was on the floor; the barbers swept it aside until they really cleaned up at the end of the day.

I: Do you remember the kind of clippers they used on your neck?

AB: The first ones were operated by hand. They sheared sheep with hand tools, too, before they got the electric ones.

I: Do you remember how the hand-operated clippers felt?

AB: If they got the least bit dull, they pulled.

Neighborhood Grocery Stores

I: La Grande once had many more neighborhood groceries than it does now. Which ones do you remember seeing?

AB: Yes, there used to be a lot of little ones around town but few now. There's one on Spruce, the Willow Grocery, and what used to be Sinden's on Fir and Y. Jean [Ariel's wife] went to school with the daughter of the Sindens. There used to be one across from Riveria School and Joel's, of course. A family named Mills had one on about 1st and L. Others were the 4th Street Grocery, at the corner with C Avenue; the Highway Grocery; and the Log Cabin Grocery, which actually had the appearance of a log cabin.

I: What's your explanation for why there were so many neighborhood groceries?

AB: During the Depression, a lot of people jacked up their automobiles, left them in the garage, and walked. Walking to the grocery store was a lot easier than trying to go clear downtown to Safeway or Piggly Wiggly. Of course, milk was delivered. If you let it sit out in the cold, the next day you might find the paper milk cap on the milk bottle about an inch or so above the top of

the bottle. I don't know that it ever broke any bottles, but it froze a few.

I: Do you remember shopping yourself at one of these neighborhood groceries?

AB: No, because my dad had a car.

I: You yourself didn't shop in them?

AB: Not for groceries. My mother dealt with them. I don't think that we had a charge account like a lot of people did during that time.

I: Did many people run up a bill and pay it once a month or once every two months--whatever they could manage?

AB: Yes, for whatever period. Due to the fact that we had the farm and sold cream to the Union Creamery, we could draw butter and cheese against the cream. I can remember going to the grocery store with a $20 bill to buy enough groceries for a family of four and a couple hired men for a month. Waldo Geddes was a grocer in town, in the block across from Penney's, I think. Mother traded with him quite a bit and sometimes sent me in for stuff. I remember he suckered me into biting a green persimmon one time, so it was free. He was that kind of a joker. These small grocery stores kept all kinds of hours to accommodate people.

I: What would be your estimation about the importance of these neighborhood groceries for social exchange--not just buying groceries but gossip and all the other kinds of things that help to build the fabric of a community?

AB: I don't know that I can answer that one. In a sense, I suppose they did act as a little neighborhood center. The fact that some of them are still going is a pretty good indication of that because the people that support the store are those that are close by or at least used to be. That's not so much the case anymore because people drive out to the larger grocery stores.

I: The La Grande City Directory for that earlier period is a pretty good source for all the names of the groceries.

Helping to Gather Data for the La Grande City Directory

AB: I worked for the city in 1948 when they made that city directory. I went to every house west of Greenwood and north of the railroad track, plus some others in town and also in Imbler and Elgin.

I: Did you have to ask questions?

AB: The fellow that was running it for R. L. Polk and Company had a series of file cards; he gave me some of those for my territory, and I went out to verify the information on the cards. I asked them if they wanted to be in the new directory; they had a choice. When I showed up, I got invited into more places in that part of town than I'd ever been in before. A lot of people wanted somebody to talk to. I think that's still the case. I was a total stranger, but they invited me in and started telling me their troubles. I had a hard time just getting my day's work done that way.

I: I imagine you had a few factual questions to ask, didn't you?

AB: Yes. The name, address, telephone number, and whether they wanted to be in the directory or not. If the person whose name was on the card no longer lived at that address, I made out a new card for the people who did live there.

I: Did you also ask how many people lived in the house?

AB: Yes, I had the names of the ones that were there. I ran into some peculiar situations, too. What is it the French say: *menage a trois* [i.e., implying an unconventional cohabitation arrangement]?

I: Since you did that work, you must have had some impression about the importance of the city directory at the time.

AB: It must have been important enough that advertisers paid for it.

I: What were you thinking at the time was the reason for having one?

AB: I didn't pay any attention to the reason. It was just a job.

Other Work for the City of La Grande

AB: When we got through with that, I went to work for a while with the City Engineer.

I: Was this all before you went to college?

AB: No. I had finished my college courses in March. This was during the summer before I went to work at Imbler School. For the City Engineer we did two things. First, we went to the cemeteries in town--Hillcrest, the Catholic one, and Grandview--and put down all of the information that we could read off the stones; the engineer did all the fancy stuff of drawing the plats after we got the information.

The other thing I did was to run a surveyor's instrument-- more of a level than anything else. We had the covers off of all the manholes we could find in town, and he took the depths. I think as a result of the work we did that summer that they put in the storm sewer. The sanitary and the storm all went into the same disposal system to begin with; it was overcrowded by population and storms. For example, the flow came down M Avenue from way up to the west and down that hill. When enough water went into catch basins from a thunderstorm or whatever, the manhole cover at the bottom of 6th Street hill was lifted off because of the water pressure. So they were in the process of changing all of that.

I: At that time, where do you think all of the sewage and the runoff water went?

AB: It went to that old disposal plant that's where the Pepsi-Cola bottling place is [about a mile east of La Grande on Highway 30] or close to it.

I: Was it an open pond?

AB: Yes, it was all open. When they got through treating it, it went in the ditch

that went on out across the valley someplace. I'd have to go out and trace that, but it went down along the railroad track and then I think it turned where the sale yard [i.e., livestock sales] is presently. I don't know whether they used it for irrigation or what out there. The reason the city took the storm drainage out to the east was that there is low ground between Y Avenue and the Grande Ronde River. The concern was that, if pressure in this low spot broke through the drain line, homes located in that area would be flooded.

The stream coming down out of Deal Canyon goes under the sidewalk on 1st Street and part of it goes under the high school. The high school auditorium has been flooded a time or two because they didn't put in a big enough pipe to handle it. One pipe goes, I think, to I Avenue and then joins up with the water from Mill Canyon to go under the college until it comes out down below. The other half of it goes down 1st to Jefferson and used to go down the alley between Adams and Jefferson. When the big flood hit in '65, I think it was, it put water in the basement of the stores like Globe Furniture and Zimmerman's. They finally redid that one and put in a bigger flow; I think they tore up Jefferson and took it down across the underpass and into the ditch there. All of that stuff came at a later time as a result of what the City Engineer was working on that summer when I worked with him.

I: Did you get any information about who may have designed the first sewer system for La Grande?

AB: Oh, good night! Mercy no! He had some plats, but they weren't complete. Like from the old Purdy's Dutch Windmill [at intersection of 4th Avenue and Depot Street], there was a four-inch line that drained from there down to Pennsylvania Avenue. Of course, they had to replace and redo that one, too.

Union County Swimming Pools

I: What firsthand knowledge do you have of early swimming pools?

AB: Crystal Plunge was located on the west side of the 2nd Street viaduct, north of the railroad tracks. I think the city uses that as a storage space now.

I: Who had the idea of putting it there?

AB: As I understand it, there was an artesian well there, but I don't know who had the idea. I was just a kid when I went swimming there. I remember the water was cold. I don't know when it disappeared, though it was a long time back.

I: Describe it a little more.

Crystal Plunge, privately operated swimming pool near 2nd Street viaduct,1920s
Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

AB: It was just a concrete hole in the ground. I would guess it was probably close to forty feet long.

I: Do you think that the artesian well was the only means of changing the water? They didn't use chlorine or any other purifier?

AB: Who needed chlorine back in those days? I'm not even sure they put anything in the city drinking water at that point.

I: Was this a pool used mainly by young boys?

AB: No. Kids of all sizes and varieties used it, and I guess some adults, too.

I: Was it open maybe five or six months in the year?

AB: I think five would be stretching it quite a bit. Four might have covered it. You've got to remember the water wasn't warm, first of all, and come September the days aren't too warm either around here.

I: Why do you think the Crystal Plunge closed?

AB: I couldn't give you a good reason. Sometimes the facilities just plain wear out, or maybe somebody came along and condemned the place.

I: Could it have been a money loser?

AB: Probably.

I: How many times do you think you went there?

AB: Not enough to get much etch in my memory, I guess.

I: Mostly when you were quite young?

AB: This would have been probably during the time that we lived on 3rd Street and I was thirteen or fourteen. I got to the place where I could drive to Cove. Cove swimming pool had a little bit warmer water. I could tell you more about the facilities than I could about Crystal Plunge. Royal Borkgren, the owner, was a good guy and never ratted on any kid that had skipped school to go to his swimming pool.

I: He ran the pool for quite a number of years, didn't he?

AB: Yes. When he was running it, there was a big log that ran across the center of the pool from the side where the changing rooms and diving tower were. In those days it was verboten for somebody to get up on the log and walk across the pool or dive from the log.

I: What was the log intended for?

AB: I don't know. It was just there.

I: It sounds as though, if you were diving off the diving board, you might have hit it.

AB: The diving board was far enough to the north side of it that there was no problem. In fact, the little tower was far enough to the side that there wouldn't have been a problem.

I: From your perspective, what were the

attitudes people had about the Cove pool?

AB: It was a great place for kids and for people. I know that a lot of fellows that worked in the harvest at Cove ended up in the swimming pool in the evening--a place to cool off and clean up; you had to take a shower before you got in.

Royal was a nice guy, who always drained the pool and saw that it was scrubbed down and cleaned. I saw him fish a niece of my first wife out of the pool. The kid didn't have any fear and went right out and jumped in the deep end, though she couldn't swim. He had the stuff to fish them out with, and I suppose she wasn't the only one he rescued that way.

From La Grande, Harvey Carter [formerly principal in old Central School building on 4th Street] organized a group of us to take the lifesaving course that was taught there. That was in connection not only with a community service, but also for the Boy Scouts' merit-badge lifesaving training and testing.

I: Do you know how the Cove pool got started?

AB: I don't know, but it's been there sixty-five years for sure.

I: Did you hear people considerably older than you talking about having gone there?

AB: My mother and dad and my Uncle Walt went swimming over there. Uncle Walt rubbed my mother's toes against the rough finished concrete on the walls in places and took off a corn. She never went back again. I don't ever remember my mother or dad going swimming.

I: Was it at that time a place for family reunions or gatherings?

AB: Royal had a little park facility up away from the pool where we could go for end-of-the-year picnics. I went with a bunch of eighth grade kids, but they stopped taking La Grande kids. Insurance and lawsuits became a big proposition, so that ended. I took eighth grade kids over there two or three times at the end of the year, but they stopped taking La Grande kids. They swam in the morning, we had our picnic and barbeque, and they swam in the afternoon--and got sunburned. He had a park area up away from the swimming pool. I think it's been closed off. If I remember right, he had teeter-totters there. Then, of course, there was the area by the pool with little barbecue stands. A lot of family picnics were held over there.

I: And then there was the Pine Cone swimming pool. Did you go there often?

AB: Every once in a while we'd ride up there [about three miles west of La Grande] on our bicycles. It was located where the highway weighing station is now. I think they got the water for that from the Grande Ronde River. They had a tower on the east end of the pool and dressing rooms, they had an auto camp in connection with the swimming pool.

The Ingrams ran it at the time. They had a son named Bud who had a motorcycle. When some of us younguns were in the pool, we saw him get on that motorcycle and, of course, we could hear it. He rode up toward Perry, and then pretty soon we saw him coming back down the highway, standing on the seat of his motorcycle--which none of us wanted to try.

I: Do you remember how much it cost to get in?

AB: No, but it couldn't have been very much or we couldn't have used it.

I: When you rode your bicycles out there, were you using the main road?

AB: On the old highway.

I: Was it fairly heavily traveled?

AB: It didn't seem to me like we got passed all that often. Freight trucks basically didn't exist at that time, though there might have been some. Gasoline tankers came in rarely. I suppose we followed the same rules as the cars did. We didn't ride on the wrong side of the street like a lot of characters in La Grande do nowadays, including adults, which, if I understand it correctly, is illegal, but it's still done. It gave us a little exercise. One thing about it is we could coast quite a bit of the way back to town.

I: Were there other places to stop at or loiter at on the way to and from that pool?

AB: No, there wasn't anything from the time we left the Gangloff Park [less than one-half mile west of La Grande] until we got to Pine Cone, although we could get off onto the side of the road at a place under and near the old railroad trestle across the highway. We could go up Bear Creek, I think it was, which took off down in that corner.

I: No place to fish along the way?

AB: Yes, we could fish, but, when you have a swimming suit on, you're not really into fishing. We had something else in mind.

La Grande Brickyard

I: Did you remember seeing the brickyard on any of those trips?

AB: I know where it was located, and I know that a lot of bricks came out of there, but the brickyard was down under the highway.

I: Weren't you curious enough to go down there so you could get a closer look?

Pine Cone auto camp and swimming pool (now demolished), 1940s, located where I-84 weighing station is now, approx. three miles west of La Grande
Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

AB: They're just a bunch of bricks to kids. We weren't concerned about it particularly.

I: Was steam coming out and a lot of noise?

AB: I don't remember any particular noise. There could have been, but the railroad tracks are down there below, and there were lot of steam locomotives at that time. I think probably the railroad noise would have blocked out a lot of other noise because, when the engineer was up toward that end of the track heading west, he'd toot that whistle to give a high ball to the conductor at the rear end so he could signal they were clear to go. So, no, I never did get down near the brickyard when I was a kid.

Other Memories of La Grande

I: What are some of your other memories about buildings and events in town?

AB: I'm quite sure that the building where Globe Furniture is now was once a Safeway store. The reason I remember is that the underpass wasn't there, so in order to get onto the Island City highway, cars came down the street on the side of that building, crossed over Adams, followed a little curvy road around, and went across the railroad tracks to get onto the Island City Strip.

When the underpass was built, it was only two lanes wide to start with. I have also seen it full of water from Adams onto the other end. That happened, I think, in the flood that came in January '65. That's a case where, if the water had been about another twelve inches deeper at the head gate to the May Park water ditch, it would have come over the head gate and come not only down the ditch but probably down the old river channel. I would have been perched on an island, too. [Ariel lives in May Park.]

Another thing that was changed is the area where the Federal Credit Union is now--on the little triangle that faces Spring Street on the south [3 Depot Street]. The Dutch windmill was there, and that's where the Purdys had their ice cream store. When they quit making ice cream, that building was moved to just across the railroad tracks on East N and made into an apartment.

Willow, Greenwood, and Riveria schools didn't have gymnasiums when I started school. In fact, Willow Street wasn't even paved back when I started school. Where the city garbage disposal office is on Willow, there used to be a vinegar works, a place where they made vinegar. I really got a whiff of that as I walked by on the way to school. That business lasted quite a number of years.

Lumbering and Sawmills in Union County

I: You mentioned the Bowman-Hicks Mill. Say more about that and what you remember about the lumber business in Union County.

AB: I can remember being on the old Bowman-Hicks Mill grounds when it was still a logging mill and before it went out of business in the '30s. There was

a railroad spur which came from the railroad yards down across the river; they could dump their logs in the mill-pond off those railroad cars.

Whether they got any of the logs that came by railroad from up past the Starkey store I don't know. But I've seen a railroad engine take the spur from the mainline and go up Meadow Creek toward where the Starkey settlement was (the present Camp Elkhana). There also was a railroad spur up Five Points Creek. That had been taken out before 1934 or '35, when I spent time riding after cattle in that country. However, I did see a place where they had been logging on top of a ridge. They had created a chute by facing part of the logs, putting them together like a V, and greasing the chute so that they could skid the logs down. They dropped off where they could be picked up, put on the railroad cars, and moved.

Part of the house that I live in was made with lumber which came from the Bowman-Hicks mill when it was torn down. My dad got a lot of shiplap from there. The floor joists in the house were beams in that mill. A green shed which sits back off the end of Riddle Road was moved from the Bowman-Hicks mill. We did that all in the '30s.

I can also remember that the Stoddard Lumber Company was at one time located at Perry and later moved up to Pondosa, next to Medical Springs [east of Union]. David I. Stoddard, as I understand it, parted company with the rest of the Stoddard boys by the time they decided to make that move.

The main lumber company in town was the Mt. Emily Lumber Co., which was owned by Stange; the Kinzels and some others had an interest in it. It was during the time Stange was operating that mill that the Stange Manor was built and occupied as the Stange's home.

Ariel's Teaching Career

I: I'd like you to talk as much as you're willing to about your experience in being a teacher in Union County schools. What did you teach?

AB: I've taught everything from kindergarten up to college level--everything except girls' P. E.

I: Did you focus on something special?

AB: On my first job, I didn't know what I was getting into. They don't teach you that in college; you learn that on the job. I was the grade-school principal for Imbler School and taught seventh and eighth grade. I coached what they had for basketball and baseball teams in the grade school. I drove bus on occasion and did a few other things. It seems like I worked about sixteen hours a day just to keep my head above water, but part of the reason is that I didn't know what I was doing.

After three years there, my GI time [i.e., WW II veterans' eligibility for college work] was beginning to expire, so I quit and spent a year at the

University of Oregon, coming out with a master's degree. The bachelor's degree I'd gotten at Eastern Oregon College. Incidentally, I have considered going back up there and asking them to upgrade my diploma because it does not say *University* on what I have from up there on the hill. [Eastern Oregon College became a university in the 1990s.]

I came back to La Grande in 1952 and was doing various things, surviving all right. The local school district in La Grande was undergoing some changes. Jack Jenkins, who had been with the school district, quit and took the superintendency in Wallowa. That left a problem at La Grande High School, and they came after me. What they gave me to do was to teach one class of boys--total boys--U. S. History. Out of that bunch about half of them had lost their drivers' licenses somewhere during the year one way or another. Jack Beck had taken a .38 automatic away from one of them in a P. E. class. But somehow I managed to cope with those guys and got along with them well.

Towards the end of the year, I took them to the courthouse, where they got in on a trial. It took me about three or four days to convince them that, if they went back to see the rest of the trial, I'd have to mark them absent. One of them asked, "Can't we have our own trial?" With the experience they'd had, they selected a judge and prosecutor, D.A, defense lawyer, witnesses, and jury. For about six weeks, the teaching I did was to sit in the back of the room, answering a question once in a while, while they went on with this trial--surprise witnesses and everything. They were digging into the books to see what was legal. I'd have matched them against anybody in school for knowledge of the way courts work by the time we were through. It got so good that kids were lining up outside the door when class was over to find out what happened in the trial that morning.

Imbler Elementary and High School, where Ariel taught in late 1940s
(still in use as elementary school in 2003)
Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

On the basis of that, the administrators figured I was pretty good, and they hired me. I stayed in the junior high for long years, and, when they finally went to the four-year high school, Betty Ragsdale and I moved over there. That's where I retired from.

I did a shocking thing to the school board. They thought they were doing really well with teachers' salaries. We got out salary schedules of other places of comparable size in the state. It kind of floored them because they weren't doing as well by us as they thought they were.

I never had very much to do with the board because the superintendent is the one that deals with the board, and he's the one that deals with the teachers.

I did have a lot to do with one of the superintendents because I happened to be the Education Association president for a year way back when. I didn't have any difficulties in dealing with him because I found one procedure for dealing with him. If I had something to suggest that meant a change, I didn't ask him for an immediate answer; I gave him a few days. The automatic answer is no. He was more likely to say yes if I gave it a few days.

When they were considering building the new high school building, some of us made it to a board meeting. We told them some of the difficulties we were having in the old LHS [at 4th Street and M Avenue]. I talked and the longer I talked, the bigger the eyes got. I could tell they didn't believe a word I was saying about the state of that building.

I: Tell me what some of those difficulties were.

AB: For one, I had the room on the south-east corner of the building, second floor. One window I could not close by about four inches. So to keep the draft out from the wind that blows that direction, I had a towel stuffed in there in the wintertime. The other windows were not really weatherproof either. The floor joists had sagged in some places; when we walked on the floor it went down and then up into place where it was held by the walls.

Old La Grande High School building
at 4th Street and M Avenue, 1920s
(now demolished)
Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

I: Was it to the point of being dangerous, do you think?

AB: They probably could have used that building for another hundred years, and it would have been in better shape than some buildings I saw in England. Another thing happened one spring day when I had the windows open for the room we were in on the north side, second story, of the old La Grande High School Building. The powder house that was located across town up the Owsley Canyon Road blew up. The blast really rattled the windows but we didn't lose any glass. If the windows and doors hadn't been open, shattered glass might have been spread among kids.

Buildings with Historic Value

I: Do you think the old La Grande High School building had enough historic value that it should have been saved and repaired, even though that might have cost more than a new building?

AB: We don't do things that way in this county. It's not the thing. The old Foley Hotel is gone. The new Foley Hotel is gone. Safeway's gone. The LDS tabernacle is gone. The St. Joseph Hospital came along at a later time, and it's been reworked to be the county building. We live in a build-'em-up, tear-'em-down society. We don't think about saving things.

In remodeling the old high school building, they would have run into the asbestos problem they had when they tore it down. They would have had to replace all of the windows because they were no longer weatherproof. They probably would have had to revise the heating plant; they had the stoker set in that little building in the corner of the L between part of the high school and the gym. All the time I taught there, that school was only closed once because of weather factors, and that's when a lot of snow melted off the field, ran around the corner, and filled up the place where the stokers were and put them out of business. It got so cold in there we had to send kids home.

Before they built the new gymnasium, which was opened in 1936, they surveyed the football/baseball field and found that it was nine feet lower on the northeast corner than it was on the southwest corner. So that's when they leveled up the field. The old baseball backstop that was in the northeast corner of the field, up against the unpaved 3rd Street went down, too. That was all part of the package with the new gymnasium. I think that's about the time they started burning coal, too, because they put the gymnasium in the area where they used to stack cord wood for the furnace.

Foley Hotel (now demolished)
on Adams Avenue, 1940s
Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

That new gymnasium was probably the best one in eastern Oregon. I don't know how long that reputation lasted, but for a while anyway.

I: Have you been in on discussions where the topic was historic preservation?

AB: Yes. I was the last agent bishop for the old tabernacle. I wrote letters to the powers that be regarding its status as the oldest tabernacle in the Pacific Northwest. There were people in town who were not members of the LDS church that felt that it should have been preserved. We even had the head man in the building department here going over it. But finally the decision was made far away from here that it was time to let it go. There were structural problems.

I: Were there just a few people in town who thought that it had historical value that made it worth preserving?

AB: Let me put it this way. There were several interested nonmembers that talked to me, and, of course, there were members that were, too. It was a historic spot as far as the Mormon church in this area is concerned because at one time Union Stake headquarters stretched from Boise, Idaho to Portland, Oregon. This is where the headquarters had to be. That lasted for about a year back about 1901 or 1902. But that, I guess, is sort of beside the point. Everything's gone now.

The Old L.D.S. Tabernacle in La Grande

I: What are some of your memories of the old L.D.S. tabernacle?

AB: I belong to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commonly known as the Mormon Church. When we lived on Catherine Creek, we still came to La Grande because of my dad's responsibilities in the church. We often arrived at the old tabernacle [on 4th Street between N and O Avenues] earlier than the Stoddard clan, that lived katy-corner across the street. I think I was baptized in the baptismal font there. When it was remodeled, Dick Stoddard and I stood outside in the rain and mixed the cement to make the new one that Elmer Perry was in charge of.

But we did have difficulties with the building. It had been reshingled with thick butt shakes in the 1930s-- George R. Lyman sort of in charge and Glen Metcalf doing the work. Over time, in the part that was exposed to weather those shingles began to come apart. A heavy rainstorm would wash little slivers of wood down into the gutters. At one place, it was plugged up on the O Avenue side of the building where the stairs went to the west tower room. It backed up over the flashing and came down the wall inside. Another difficulty was that driving rainstorms came through, to some degree, on the west side of the building, up toward the front where the Gethsemane picture of the Savior was hung. We'd have a wet plaster inside till it dried out on that. The heating was a problem. If it was warm enough up in the top tower room, everybody in the chapel was cooking. If it was just comfortable in the chapel in the wintertime, the tower room was freezing.

Old L.D.S. Tabernacle building
at 4th Street and O Avenue, 1920s
(now demolished)
Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

I: Were there meetings in the tower rooms?

AB: Sunday School classes were held in the tower rooms. Another difficulty was about two weeks before we had a stake conference: the sewer line went out. Ernest Woodard, who was helping with that, got hold of Roto Rooter. He told me later, "I knew we were in trouble when the Roto Rooter came up out of the ground." The line had been laid with terra cotta tile maybe about 1918, when they put modern plumbing in the tabernacle. Over a period of years, due to the action of the water and the weather and so on, the tile had begun to cave in on itself. Fortunately, we were able to replace the line inside the parking area and didn't have to dig up

a lot of 5th Street to get to O Avenue, where the city sewer connection was.

Another problem was that, when they remodeled in the 1950s, they put a big coal bin between the recreational hall and the tabernacle. When a carload of coal came in from Utah, we had to have it unloaded and hauled up to fill the bin. The coal was fed to the stoker in the furnace. But the coal needed to heat the tabernacle created a lot of clinkers that always had to be disposed of. Before that, when we were burning wood, I can remember cords of wood stacked eight feet high between the two buildings--stretching from about forty feet from east of the 4th Street sidewalk out to the end of the recreational hall and beyond. That was what was used for a good many years to fuel the fires that kept people warm.

I: Did they keep it warm every day or just during classes and church?

AB: When they got the stoker in, it was easy just to let things go and heat all of the building. But when it was fired by hand, I think they may have kept some fire going, but I'm not sure. The four-foot lengths of cord wood had to be tossed down one level and then another level before they got into the furnace.

I: What happened to the stained glass windows that were in the old tabernacle?

AB: The stake made the arrangements for taking those windows down. The stained glass windows, incidentally, were made by a company in New Jersey, which has long since gone out of business. All of the chapels--in Baker, Halfway, Enterprise, Elgin, Pendleton, Pilot Rock, and two in La Grande--have bits of stained glass in them that came from the old tabernacle. The extra glass was saved and used for that purpose.

We had hoped to use the circular window that was way up high on the east side of the building, because it had in it the eye that represents the all-seeing eye of God. But when we got that part down, we found that there was a piece missing just about the shape and size of the eye but too close to the eye for them to be able to replace it. So we used a different circular window in the south end of the new stake center.

On the west side we found that the wooden casing of the big circular window had been affected by dry rot; it had settled about six inches without making any gaps up at the top because

Circular stained glass window, originally in old L.D.S. tabernacle, now in Elgin Stake Center
Photo by Eugene Smith

of the flashing. The glass in the bottom of the window had bent in a cup shape, and the lead had gone with it. Consequently, there were no cracks in that part of the window.

One of the pictures which hung on the left side of the upper chapel, as you looked toward the front, pictured the Angel Moroni and the gold plates, with Joseph Smith kneeling. That picture was saved by Larry Hibbert and is now presently on display in the Portland temple.

I: Was everything of historic value saved and reused?

AB: Luana Peck wanted the cover from the tabernacle chimney, which was a round piece of metal we had used to cover the hole in house chimney when we took the stove pipe out for the summer. She wanted the one out of the tabernacle because her dad worked on it. I managed to liberate that for her. I think she painted something on it.

Earlier Mormon Meeting Places

AB: I can remember being in the first chapel that was built in La Grande for the Mormon Church. It stood facing on 4th Street in line with N Avenue. I can remember seeing the red flannel curtains that divided the hall into classrooms.

The Second Ward was organized about 1924 and met in a house or another building. In the late 20s, that building was jacked up, moved across town, and is the building now where the Family History Center is located [on Fir Street]. That became the Second Ward chapel until 1950, when both wards began to meet up in the tabernacle. It's had its spot in history. Besides being a ward chapel during the late '30s and early '40s, it became the recreational hall when the benches were pushed back of the chapel area. I've been there when they had a dance. Grandpas, grandmas, and little kids came. Babies were parked on benches and went to sleep for the most part. Everybody had a chance to dance in the evening and had a good time.
A little later on, there was a welfare cannery in the basement. The bishop's storehouse was on the north side for quite a while. Now the Family History

Early meeting place for
La Grande Chapel, L.D.S.
Photo courtesy of Ariel Bean

L.D.S. Family History Center in La Grande
Photo courtesy of Ariel Bean

Center and the genealogical extraction site are on the upper level. Incidentally, the use of all the materials there is free except that the user has to pay the postage both ways on microfilms sent from Salt Lake City. It's open to the public as a public service.

The recreational hall that used to stand next to the tabernacle at 4th and N had the best gymnasium in eastern Oregon up until the one at La Grande High School was built about 1936. I saw my first high school basketball played in the Mormon Church recreational hall. Cliff Exley, who used to coach in the school district, said basketball in La Grande went downhill when the Mormons had to lock the gym. That was due, I guess, to vandalism. When I was a young man and in my teens, anybody could go in, turn on the lights, and play ball. A lot of us did that.

Early Union County Mormons and Sugar Beets

I: Why did they quit raising sugar beets here?

AB: As I understand it, there were at least three reasons. First, beets need a lot of water and there wasn't any water at Nibley. Remember, it's up on the hill and Catherine Creek is hundred-plus feet lower. There were no wells or sprinkler systems in those days, so a lot of the territory where they proposed to raise beets was dry land.

Second, I understand that some kind of disease--mosaic or something--hit the beets, and they didn't have any way to whip that.

The third thing that would caution you not to raise beets was that it was all hand labor at the time, pretty much. They had to be thinned after weeding. I've seen fellows doing that; the green from the beet tops was worked into their fingers, and the skin on the fingers and thumbs was cracked as a result of so much pulling. The farmers found that, by raising grain and hay, they could make as much money as they'd been making with the beets and didn't have to work as hard.

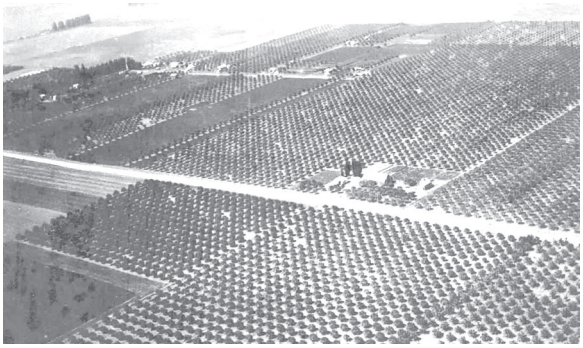
Recreational hall (now demolished) next to old L.D.S. tabernacle in La Grande--
main floor gym on right, lower floor with stage on left
Photos courtesy of Ariel Bean

Farming Ventures in Union County

I: What other farming ventures in Union county do you know about?

AB: We did raise apples here. As I was told, on one occasion they raised so many apples in the valley out around Imbler that the Imbler farmers loaded up enough apples on a train to make a shipload, and those apples were taken to England to sell. Back when I taught at Imbler, Lyle Wilson was probably the only apple man that was left out there; practically all the apple orchards were gone. They still had scattered groups of trees here and there, although by the time I knew anything about it for sure, there were more cherry orchards out that way than apples by far. They found they could make as much or more money growing grain and hay.

Apples are a labor-intensive crop. You have to prune, you have to thin the apples, you have to spray, then you have to pick the apples and see that they're graded and boxed properly. One fellow could do a whole lot more with hay or grain by himself than he could do with apples, and that made the changeover.



Apple orchards near Imbler, 1920s
Photo courtesy of Clayton Fox

Grass seed, after World War II, became quite a crop in the valley. My dad tumbled to the fact that the grass seed that was too small to make it through the cleaners was rejected, and the good seed was saved. The hulls that were processed were high in protein content, so we began to haul that and feed to the beef herds that we were building. It made the cattle look sleek as could be. The only difficulty is that you get thin manure when you use that for feed. Later on, they started to pellet it out here. When we were getting it, though, the farmers were giving it away. It fell off the cleaner into their seed sacks, and we'd take it and dump it for them, roll the sacks, and see that they got them back. They were glad to get rid of it that way and didn't have to worry about the labor end of it. My biggest day of hauling that stuff, I think I put fifteen thousand pounds in the barn. That takes a lot of that light stuff because a sack of it might weigh only fifteen to twenty pounds. I was busy that day.

I: You've been busy all your life, it sounds like. Did you do some farming, too?

AB: I was growing wheat here; we owned the place where the trailer courts are [near Island City Way]. We bought that land in 1948 and farmed it for a while before my dad died. Then we went out of the farming business and sold off bits and pieces of it here and there.

I: Were you thinking of being a farmer yourself at that time?

AB: No. We just had the land and needed to use it. I had to teach school to make a living so I could afford to farm.

My perception of a farmer's life now is twofold. One, due to the machinery, it's a whole lot easier than it used to be; there was a lot of hand labor. For a hay field, for example, you had to shock the hay with a pitchfork, use a pitchfork to load it on the slip or on the wagon to haul it, and stack the hay. A fellow who could make a good hay-stack was somewhat of an artist at the time. The grain was cut with a binder and put into bundles. Then those bundles had to be shocked and let dry. You picked them by hand and put them on a wagon to haul them to a threshing machine, where you pitched them off. That's all done with a combine now. One fellow can take care of a larger grain field than probably a crew of six to ten men could have done under the old system.

The other thing about it is, though, that if you have enough money to start farming nowadays, you don't need to. You just invest it at a low percent of interest, and you'll make more money.

Farming is probably about as big a gamble as you'll find due to the weather, the markets, and transportation. I've been told that the truck driver that pulls out of Willie Hamann's stills--where they collect the peppermint oil--has to be insured for $1 million. Part of that is the price of the oil itself, but I think a lot of it perhaps is a protection from possible spills and cleanup that might follow. But it's expensive--machinery, tractors, combines; $100,000 sometimes will get you in the door, but it won't pay for it all.

I: And it would take a while to get that all paid off.

AB: Yes. It'd take quite a while. Where people a hundred years ago were making a living for a family on forty acres, you can't do it now. In fact, you'd need ten or fifteen times that much, probably, to have a profitable farm business. You have to specialize in some particular high-priced thing at the market.

Back in the '50s, I thought maybe I'd get rich raising cherries. I had about four hundred and fifty trees here in May Park. To begin with, when my folks moved out at the end of Riddle Road, we had some cherry trees, and all we had to do, it seemed like, was water them a little bit and pick the cherries. Over the course of time, the cherry fruit fly moved into the valley and that has to be sprayed for. The fruit fly isn't as fast as the house fly. I have actually caught a cherry fruit fly with my fingers in the orchard. It's a funny little sort of brownish fly, with a white diamond on its back and a stinger tail that lays the eggs in the cherry; the egg develops into a worm. The growers' associations had to inspect the cherries quite thoroughly. Other things have come in since that time besides the cherry fruit fly: the shot-hole borer, little leaf, gumosis, and the labor situation has changed. Generally, what you will see in the large orchards in the valley will be a crew of Mexican pickers with a crew boss. It used to be that we had Cauca-

sian people, who followed the fruit and worked the orchards. Half of them usually started maybe in Stockton, California, then moved to the Willamette Valley, the area around The Dalles, and then possibly either here or into Yakima, Washington. If they came here, the next cherry-picking opportunity was probably on the east side of Flathead Lake in Montana. They could swing back into Washington for thinning apples or picking pears or something else.

The people doing that were all kinds: those just existing from one job to the next and those that had their own living accommodations--trailers that they took with them--and various layers in between. That kind of thing has changed, and I'm not current with it, except that I know that the Russel Hug orchards and the Johnson orchards are some of the bigger ones in the valley and that they do have labor camps, as well as Miller's over at Cove. They provide at least some kind of shelter for the pickers that come in.

I: Don't the same ones come back every year?

AB: When I was in the business, yes, we'd have the same ones come back. They worked here in May Park because we would be a little bit earlier with our cherries than they would be out on Pumpkin Ridge or over at Cove. They cleaned up our place here and still got in a considerable amount of work somewhere across the valley.

I: Is the climate that much different in parts if the Grande Ronde Valley?

AB: Yes. We always figured that about the 10th of July we could start picking our Royal Annes. The Bings and Lamberts came at a later time. There was only one year in the time that my folks had cherries that we had everything picked by the 4th of July. It was an early year.

There was one year when I had cherries on only half of the trees because Mike Caroll, who had an orchard to the west, had smudged, and the wind had rolled that heat from his place down at sort of an angle all the way through what I had. Where it had touched down I had cherries, and where it had skipped I didn't have.

Playing Football at La Grande High School

I: You talked earlier about your father's playing football at La Grande High School. You played on the football team, too, didn't you? Why?

AB: I don't know. I guess I was crazy enough to want to do it.

I: Did you realize that injury was likely?

AB: Yes, but that isn't what broke my nose. I didn't get any injuries out of that like some guys did. There were fights at games when I was going to high school. One high school kid took along a little hand satchel with his fighting clothes in it. He usually got in a fight with somebody in Baker out behind a billboard somewhere. This was in 1938 and '39. I never did see one of his fights.

I: I suppose football players were admired around the high school.

AB: You got a letterman's sweater to wear and a stripe on the arm for each year of play. Some of those guys had four stripes before they graduated from high school.

I: Can you describe team spirit?

AB: I think it must have been pretty good because we went undefeated in the state in 1939. We didn't have playoffs then, so we didn't get to go across the state.

There was a lot of rivalry. We played Baker twice a year--early in the fall and on Armistice Day. We beat Pendleton once here in La Grande in a snowstorm, and another time we played a zero-zero tie in the Round-Up grounds in Pendleton. That's the year they didn't make a yard on the punt return because Marion Huff nailed everybody right after they got the ball. We even played The Dalles. That was something to ride there on the school bus over the old road [i.e., before construction of the I-84 freeway] at about thirty-five miles an hour. In fact, coming back from there the next day, I put a peanut on the outside of the bus window and that peanut stayed on there and rode all the way back to about Meacham. That gives you an idea of how fast we weren't moving.

I: Describe the coaching.

AB: Cecil Sherwood was the coach; later on he was a grade school principal in Roseburg. Harold Hoyt was the assistant coach. Cece coached, I guess you'd call it, a single-wing. He moved the left tackle over so he had two tackles on offense, side-by-side. The quarterback handled the ball on every play; he wasn't up under the center but back. For defense he played a six-man line--two linebackers, two halfbacks, and a safety.

I: How much emphasis did he place on sportsmanship?

AB: I think on occasion there wasn't any. I heard the coach tell Peewee Marshal what to do one time. I don't think Peewee managed it, but it was laid out there for him if he could. Peewee was big enough, tough enough, and fast enough that, if the occasion had opened up, he probably could have done what the coach wanted him to do.

I: Would it be accurate to say that generally football coaches were suggesting to the team you do whatever you need to do to win, even if it meant bending the rules?

AB: No, if you got to bending the rules, you had to remember you had about three referees and a head linesman watching for this stuff.

I: Did the coaches cuss out the players in the locker room?

AB: I don't remember that was ever done. I'm not saying it wasn't, but, if it was done, it wasn't aimed at me.

I: Did you have the impression the coach was pretty tough?

AB: The coach wanted to win, sure. He wasn't afraid to call a spade a spade. He wasn't a very big guy, but that didn't bother anything. I don't recall any swearing going on. There might have been some, but I was a minor matter, so it wasn't aimed at me.

I: I suppose for most of La Grande High School's history winning in sports has been very important.

AB: I would say that's probably right.

I: Any more important than the academic part?

AB: They have never cut sports. I have seen them cut orchestra, foreign language, and juggle other things around. I can go further and say I know a fellow who was a star athlete for Baker High School. The coach did all kinds of things to keep that guy eligible to play. In La Grande High School on the bulletin board, there was a place where teachers had to sign off as to whether athletes were eligible for that game. There were two or three guys that lived in fear and trembling from about Wednesday on till they got cleared on Friday.

Political Ruminations

I: From football to politics. Not too big a leap, is it? When you were in La Grande as a younger man--later, too--what were some of your observations about politics? How was politics done around here?

AB: I will have to go back to a more recent age for that. I was told that most of the politicking took place in Graham's Drug Store for a long time. That's where McGlasson's is now [on Adams Avenue]. When the drug store closed, the politicians moved down to deBord's, which was in Pat's Alley [also on Adams Avenue]. Early one morning, before I had breakfast, I took my car in to be serviced at Goss's [a nearby car dealer]. I went over for breakfast at deBord's, and there were all the wheels [i.e., powerful city residents] in town for breakfast. That's about all I know about politics.

I: I'm sure you read articles in the newspaper.

AB: I was told by a school superintendent one time, I forget which one, that he had a list of twenty people; if those twenty people were in favor of the school budget, it would pass. He never did tell me which twenty.

I: Did this give you the impression that politics in La Grande or maybe all of Union County was kind of a boss system? A few people calling the shots?

AB: Let's put it this way. Rather than the boss system, it was a few big frogs in a little puddle. For example, Old Man Smith--that's Gordon Smith's grandfather [Gordon Smith, U.S. Senator from Oregon in 2003]--came to La Grande, he was looking for a site for the pea cannery that he eventually built in Pendleton. He told people in La Grande what he was looking for and did the same in Pendleton. He also told them that he would be back at his home in Ogden at a certain time. The Pendleton delegation was down there

with a deed to the property (where Melanie Square is now) when he got back. If I recall it correctly, La Grande didn't even give him an answer. Now that tells you about the politics.

I: Do you generalize it beyond that? Has that been the approach that people in La Grande have taken to other kinds of projects?

AB: When they started talking about the siting a new correctional facility, the wheels in La Grande didn't want to have anything to do with it. So where is it? Over there next to Ontario where the Idaho governor swears at us occasionally for having put it so close. And where does the crime in the state take place basically? In the Willamette Valley area. It doesn't make sense to me to put a prison over at Ontario when you've got to transport most of your people clear across the state.

I: What is there about La Grande management or attitudes toward civic projects that so often has seemed to place La Grande behind the curve?

AB: I don't know. I think it's kind of the attitude that I saw displayed down in Ft. Worth when I was in the service. At a rail stop there a sign in the window close to the depot said, "Let's keep the business in Ft. Worth. Dallas is big enough." I think that's the attitude. La Grande is big enough.

I: If it were bigger, there'd be more problems. Is that the idea?

AB: Sure. But there'd be more jobs. Maybe the school population wouldn't be declining quite so badly. You always get more problems with more size, but, on the other hand, take a look at the expansion of the college [now Eastern Oregon University]. I walked over that hill before there was any college building on it [i.e., before 1929]. They started out small with just the administration building. Then pretty soon they had Ackerman School and the gymnasium. You can go ahead and take a look at the other stuff. They're still building. They've taken in everything between 6th Street and nearly to 12th. They've taken in that territory clear up to C Avenue, and maybe eventually it will expand.

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