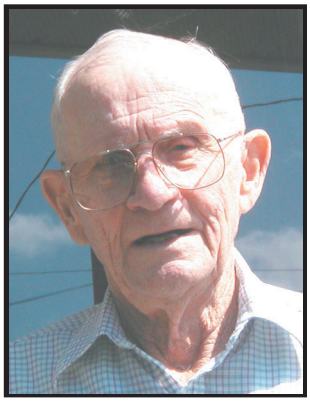
RICHARD BONNEY

Union County resident for 85 years

AN ORAL HISTORY



Interviews in August, 1997 and October, 2004
at his home in Union OR

Interviewers: Jerry Gildemeister and Eugene Smith

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

2005

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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copies of transcripts are $4.00 each + shipping & handling

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 Richard "Dick" Bonney took place in Union, where he lives alone. At age 89, his physical activity is limited by his need to use an oxygen tank twenty-four hours a day. He still drives himself to La Grande often, and he has help with housekeeping.

The first interviewer was Jerry Gildemeister, who completed a one-hour interview in August, 1997; the second interviewer was Eugene Smith, who conducted a one-and-a-half hour interview on October 11, 2004 and a one-hour follow-up interview on November 4, 2004, which included a driving tour along Union's main street.

Heather Pilling's full transcription (available for research purposes) presents the literal contents of the interview. 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.

RB designates Richard Bonney's words, *I* the interviewers'.

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Coming to Union to Start a Fish Hatchery

I: Tell me where you were born and when.

RB: I was born in Bellingham, Washington, the first day of April, 1915.

I: Why were your parents there?

RB: Dad was working at a shingle mill at that time. My mother was raised there. We moved to Oregon City for a while and then we moved to Bonneville [on the Columbia River approximately 60 miles east of Portland], where there was just a hatchery there then, no dam. Dad got a job with state Game Commission as foreman of the fish hatchery at Bonneville.

Then they sent him to Union to build a new hatchery here, though it is not a hatchery anymore. In 1919 Dad moved here; the rest of us came in 1920.

I: Was he in charge of construction?

RB: No, he was just in general charge.

I: How do you think he learned about fish hatcheries?

RB: He'd been working some with fish in Washington State.

I: It was on the job rather than in a school?

RB: Yes. He hardly went to school.

I: What do you remember about the choice of Union--Catherine Creek I think it was --for the hatchery? Do you know why it was chosen?

RB: No, I don't. I was only four years old.

I: I thought maybe you'd learned since then.

RB: No. It was a really interesting place to

Oregon State trout hatchery on Catherine Creek, near Union, 1920s
(building still there in 2004, no longer used as hatchery)
Photo courtesy of Richard Bonney

be raised. We had millions of little fish all the time at the hatchery.

I: Do you remember at what age the migrating fish come up Catherine Creek?

RB: About six years old. The salmon run up this river must have been in the thousands every year. A lot of people fished for them with gigs and grabhooks. That was legal then. We could get, I think, two salmon a day. I didn't fish for them much because Dad wouldn't let me. He said, "To hell, they aren't fit to eat any way." They'd all shrunk down [in preparation for breeding].

I remember people walking up from town in the evening and early morning to watch the salmon go over the dam there by the bridge where they were catching them.

I: Tell me how they came from the ocean to here--the route that they took.

RB: Up the Columbia River into the Snake River, then in the Grande Ronde, and finally Catherine Creek.

I: That must have been a thousand miles.

RB: It was a long way. They were about six inches around when they got here, but they were big when they left the ocean. They didn't eat when they spawned. That's why they lost all that weight.

I: Where did the fish that came up Catherine Creek spawn?

RB: They went clear up to the Catherine Creek meadows and spawned there.

Umatilla Indians and Salmon Fishing

RB: The Indians came over from Pendleton on horseback to fish for them. They'd split them down the back--not the belly --and open them to scrape the guts out. Sometimes they laid them up on a thorn brush or sometimes they built racks.

I: Did you see them do that?

RB: Yes. I talked with some of them. Then when the fish got dry, they threw them in a gunnysack and took them back to Pendleton. That was their winter food, I guess.

I: Was it during the early part of the summer or through the summer?

RB: I think May at the beginning and they stayed here as long as the run was on. They rode their horses up and down the creek to fish. I felt sorry for their horses. They looked like they could hardly stand up. Poor old things.

The Game Commission put two fish racks across the creek--one below the bridge and one above. I got the job night watching on the rack because those salmon would keep hitting the pickets and jarring them loose. I had to go along and pound them back down. I worked there for a while and had a tent pitched there. Some of the guys around town decided they wanted those branches out of there; they were going to tear them out. So Dad called a man at Imbler--a big, old, pot-bellied guy. He buckled on his pistol and said, "You boys really want to tear them out? I've got a gun, and I'll use it." They cussed him and they cussed Dad and every-

body. Later, in the middle of the night, they went up and threw a stick of dynamite down the creek. All it did was to blow about three pickets, but it scared the hell out of me--asleep there in a tent when that dynamite went off. Dad heard it and came over. We fixed the rack, but he didn't let me night-watch anymore beause I was just a damn kid. He was afraid that, if they were going to get serious about it, I might get hurt.

Finally they just took them out. So damn much opposition in one thing or another. People were greedy for the fish, and they didn't give a damn if they had any fish next year or not. It's still that way.

One old Indian was named Willy Cayuse. The Indians didn't always under stand the laws, so they'd come and talk to my dad. He could speak Chinook jargon, which was a trade language between all the west coast tribes and the white people.

I: How did he learn that?

RB: He was raised among the Indians on a reservation [on the west side of the Cascades].

I: Did he have any Indian blood do you think?

RB: No, he was just a Scotsman. One time the Indians were going back to Pendleton and Willy Cayuse came down Catherine Creek on horseback. He rode into our yard, got off his horse, talked to Dad a minute, and then he gave him the most beautiful little pouch you ever saw, made out of corn husks and velvet and deer skin--absolutely beautiful. And when he got back up on his horse, the squaw said something to him. So he got off, came over, and took two pennies out of the pouch, gave it back to Dad, and left. I took that pouch down to Maryhill [a museum on north side of Columbia River, approximately ninety miles east of Portand] and gave it to the curator there, along with two Indian baskets we had. Last time I went there, they had the Apache basket, a flat berry basket, up on a wall with a light on it and my name on it. It made me feel pretty good.

I: Why do you think they wanted to give him such a fine gift?

RB: I don't know. They liked him.

I: Had he done anything to help them?

RB: He was their informational source. I've seen three or four of them come and sit for half an hour on the hatchery porch and never say a word; then they started talking to Dad. This is a peculiar trait of Indians: they don't start a conversation right away, you've got to wait. If they had any legal papers or anything that they wanted him to interpret, he'd do that for them. He was good friends with the Indians.

I: He must have been one of very few white men around here who spoke Chinook. Maybe the only one?

RB: Yes. He tried to teach me, but I'm a little thick. I couldn't get it.

I: Would this have been in the late 1920s?

RB: Maybe a little bit into the ‘30s. It was a long time ago. They’d go up the creek and camp on Ed Miles’ land, put up their teepees, and fish there a while. Then they’d all pack up and go back to Pendleton on horseback.

I: How long do you think they would fish? How many days?

RB: Sometimes a month.

I: Was there no other place around where they could have fished the salmon?

RB: Probably they could have fished the Grande Ronde. I don’t know why they did it here. My memory is not too good because I was pretty young. I’m not making up anything; I’m trying to tell it right.

I: Where did the trout eggs that your father hatched come from?

RB: I know they shipped the trout eggs in. He’d always get them off the truck. They came in square crates with little trays of eggs in them and several trays in each crate. He had egg baskets, square metal baskets about eighteen or twenty-four inches long and about a foot wide. He set them in a trough, let the water run through, and they hatched. Farther up Catherine Creek, they had cut the water into a pipe that led down to the hatchery and into troughs. Each trough had a spout to turn the water off and on.

Then we had several ponds to put fish in. Dad strained them out of there and hauled them up to lakes or rivers.

I: Did he want to get you up there to help?

RB: I don’t think I was much help. I was pretty young, though I guess I helped him some. I helped my dad quite a bit, but I didn’t do any really hard work.

I: How many other men did he have there?

RB: He always had one and sometimes he had two or three men in the busy season. In the wintertime nobody because he let all his fish go.

Fish boxes used to transport young trout to lakes and rivers
Photo courtesy of Richard Bonney

State Game Commission truck used by Dick's father to transport fish boxes from Union hatchery to lakes and rivers, 1930s
Photo courtesy of Richard Bonney

Early Years in Union

I: How did your family get to Union?

RB: We came here on the Union Pacific Railroad from Bonneville [approximately 250 miles] on the 5th of January. I remember it was five above, the wind blowing like hell, and snow that deep. My mother had four and a half kids to look after. She was pregnant. My dad was already here. When we first got here, Dad couldn't find a place to rent--nobody wanted to rent--so we lived in two rooms up over the D & D Restaurant [see photo on p. 48].

I: The building that's there now?

RB: Yes. Al Turner ran a pool hall downstairs, and we had to eat at the Chinese restaurant across the street. I remember all us kids'd start to bawl every time we had to go to that restaurant. I don't know why.

I: You didn't like it?

RB: Didn't like it, I guess. So Al Turner's wife came to see my mother and said, "I'm sick of making these little kids bawl." They had an old restaurant in the place, with the kitchen all boarded up. I can still smell the lye water they cleaned that old kitchen with. We ate there for a while after that.

I: Did you have to go to a restaurant because there was no way to cook in your two-room apartment?

RB: Just two bedrooms is all it was. Can you imagine that with all those kids and Dad and Mother?

When we moved up to the hatchery finally, the Game Commission shipped in an Aladdin house--a pre-fab that had to be put together, not already assembled like they do now. Walt Davis, I think it was, put it together for us. By

Bonney house near fish hatchery, Catherine Creek, 1930s
Photo courtesy of Richard Bonney

Dick as young boy
Photos courtesy of Richard Bonney

that time there were five of us kids. We had one bedroom, one living room, one kitchen, one small bathroom, and a screened in back porch. That's where we lived for two or three years. I don't know how we did, but we did. There's a little story about that. Some of the inspectors came up from Portland to look at the hatchery. Mother told Dad, "You tell them I'm gonna cook dinner for 'em in this little house." So she did, but she moved all the furniture a little ways out from the wall. Boy, it was tight going! But we had a good dinner there and they appreciated it. The next year they built her a new house. I think that's the way she got it.

I: What can you remember about what meals usually consisted of--breakfast, lunch, and dinner?

RB: Breakfast was either hot cakes, biscuits, or mush, as we called it--cereal. Once in a while bacon and ham. Then for the next meal it was always taters and gravy.

I: What was lunch when you were going to school?

RB: I took a lard pail to school. Mother always put it up for me.

I: What was in the lard pail?

RB: Sandwiches mostly.

I: And fruit?

RB: Once in a while an apple or something like that.

I: A stick of celery?

RB: No.

I: No chips, no chocolate bar, no can of chocolate milk?

RB: No. Just plain old food. I believe we took some milk in a can or a jar.

I: Did you have a cow?

RB: We had a good cow.

I: Did you have to milk it?

RB: Dad milked it until we got a hired girl from up the creek; he made her milk the cow, and he made breakfast while she milked the cow. That was Stella Edvalson. She was later a teacher here.

For supper it was just about the same.

I: Taters and gravy?

RB: Taters and gravy, lots of fruit, and lots of milk. That's about it.

I: Why no meat for dinner?

RB: We probably had meat. I just forgot about that.

I: Did you have a pig or some other source of your own meat?

RB: We had a pig--maybe two, but mostly we bought our meat at the butcher shop.

I: Do you think that, since your father was an employee of the Game Commission, his salary might have been a little higher than other people's around here?

RB: A little bit, yes. I think he was making about $125 or $150 a month.

I: Which could go quite a ways at the time.

Going to School in Union

I: Did you enter the elementary school here?

RB: First grade.

I: At that time I think there were two elementary schools in Union, weren't there?

RB: Yes, North School and South School.

I: Which one did you go to?

RB: South.

I: Why wouldn't you have gone to North?

RB: I lived up Catherine Creek, which was in the South School territory.

I: Did those two schools look pretty much alike?

RB: No. One of them was brick and plaster, and the other one was wood.

I: Which one did you go to?

RB: I went to the plaster one. For its time it probably was a modern school.

I: So you entered first grade there and went through eighth?

RB: Yes, and then through high school.

I: At that time schools were conducted somewhat differently from the way they are now. A lot of people say that the discipline was more strict.

RB: Oh, boy!

I: You might expect to have your hand slapped with a ruler or …

RB: Or your butt!

I: … with a rubber hose.

RB: I had some of that. We had a principal in that school we called Fat Connor. It was not very respectful, but that's what we called him. He was big and, boy, you didn't mess with him. He'd take a rubber hose and really lay it on you. I had it happen to me once. I learned something.

I: Do you think as a result of that kind of treatment kids developed more respect for the teachers and the administrators?

RB: I think so.

I: Or was it fear?

RB: No, not …

I: Or both?

RB: Maybe both, yes. When you have a big guy that bellers after you all the time, that kind of puts the fear in you all right. But he was a good teacher.

I: What do you remember as one of the subjects where you felt you learned the most?

RB: Mathematics.

I: Up through eighth grade did that include some algebra or was it all arithmetic?

RB: No, we didn't do algebra till high school. We got that when we got into high school, along with geometry.

I: Did you take any of the state exams in eighth grade? Maybe they weren't doing that when you graduated.

RB: We did have an examination. I remember that--probably furnished by the state. A county school superintendent over the whole territory came to see us once in a while. He was a mean-looking old guy--scare you to death. But he never bothered anybody.

I: What kinds of pleasurable activities do you associate with the first eight grades of school?

RB: We used to make up games to play out in the yard, which was full of boulders--no grass or anything, just a boulder yard.

I: Hard to run on.

RB: Yes. I think somebody made up a game called Pum-Pum-Pullaway. If they pull you off your side … Oh, I can't tell you how. Then we played lots of marbles.

I: You need cement for that or some kind of hard surface.

RB: We dug holes. We used to play baseball, and Fat Conner was the referee. What he said went.

I: Was that baseball or softball?

RB: Baseball, regular baseball. Sometimes it was an old worn out ball, but we used it anyway.

I: Was that for recess or after school?

RB: Probably recess mostly and sometimes before or after school.

I: Did you have a team that played the other Union school?

RB: No. We just played among ourselves.

I: Nothing like Little League then?

RB: No, no. I'd never heard of Little League until a few years later.

I: Do you remember anything about the eighth grade graduation?

RB: No. I think we just got out of school.

I: No ceremony?

RB: I don't recall one. There could have been one, but I don't recall. I know when we graduated from high school we had a ceremony.

I: Was there any music in the first eight grades?

RB: Somebody played a piano once in a while.

I: While you sang?

RB: Yes, I guess so. We had eight teachers, one for each grade. We had a couple of teachers who could play the piano.

I: Were all these teachers women except for Fat Connor?

RB: An eighth grade teacher, who was in the high school building, was named Workman; he was the only man teacher I knew of except Fat Connor.

I: How did the women teachers dress at that time?

RB: They dressed like they should.

I: Which is?

RB: They didn't wear pants; never heard of that. They wore dresses and blouses, but as far as slacks, I'd never heard of that. They didn't do it. They probably wouldn't let them.

I: Did the teachers ever smile?

RB: Yes. Some of them were pretty smiley. I remember a couple of them were kind of crabby, but not too bad. We had a good school.

I: Do you think any of the teachers were married?

RB: Yes. Mrs. Vain and Fat Connor were, also Mrs. Reese, in first grade, and Mrs. Ade, in sixth.

I: At that time Union had more businesses than now.

RB: Yes, it had a lot of businesses.

I: And kids came in from quite a distance from the farms and the fish hatchery.

RB: Yes.

I: Did you know most of the other kids in Union schools?

RB: I knew most of them. I didn't know much about the North School because they were far away, as far as we were concerned.

I: Did you have to go right back to the fish hatchery area after school, or were there

North Union School

South Union School

The two elementary schools in Union--South in 1878, North in 1903. Dick attended the South School. After discontinuation of use of the South School, the American Legion post took over building, holding meetings and chili feeds for school kids after November 11 football games. Those events ceased after the building's demolition in the 1960s.

other after-school activities that kept you in town?

RB: I usually went right home--about a half a mile up the creek.

I: How did you get there? By bus?

RB: We had no busses.

I: How did you get there? Walk?

RB: I walked or Dad had to bring us. Harry Avery had the first school bus; he had a route that ran from Pondosa to Union. It was the only school bus that we ever had here then.

I: Why would it have come from Pondosa, maybe, for high school in Union?

RB: I think so, yes. That was it.

I: Just the way kids from Telocaset had to come to Union High School?

RB: Yes. And Ramo Flats. They had a one-room school. Fat Connor's last job was there, teaching in that one-room school.

I: When did you graduate from high school?

RB: I graduated in 1933.

I: Was there anything about high school subjects that particularly interested you?

RB: As I remember English was my favorite. I don't know how good I was at it, but that was my favorite.

I: What appealed to you about that?

RB: We had a really good teacher. Her name was Mrs. Shapper. The kids didn't fool with her. She was a disciplinarian, but she was a good teacher.

I: What made her class seem appealing to you?

RB: I really don't know. I just felt …

I: You just left with good feelings about it?

Union High School both as it was when Dick Bonney was a student and as it was in 2004

RB: Yes. She was not really strict. She was tolerant, but she didn't go along with any foolishness. That's what I meant. Some teachers did, but when you went to Mrs. Shapper's room, you minded your p's and q's.

I: Can you remember anything you read?

RB: "The Lady of the Lake" was a standard. I don't know if I remember any of it, but I read it.

I: Did you find that you were having more and more difficulty with high school as you went through? Did the subjects get harder, or did you just have less interest?

RB: I was kind of rebellious, I believe.

I: You weren't alone in that, I imagine.

RB: No. A lot of us were.

I: Maybe you got it from the other guys?

RB: I don't know. But it seemed to me like when I went from grade school to high school something kind of threw me. Of course, I had three or four different teachers, which I wasn't used to, and I had a couple of men teachers that were pretty rough because I was kind of rebellious, I guess. So high school … I got through it.

I: Did you give any thought to the possibility of going to college?

RB: Yes, but it was impossible. Dad didn't have …

I: Lack of money?

RB: No money.

I: What about the other kids in the high school? Were some of them talking about going to college?

RB: Some went, two or three of them--Burt Meyers, I think, and Evan Halsey.

I: Was there any encouragement for kids of your age to consider going to college?

RB: They talked to us about it, but we'd turn a deaf ear. I did. I didn't want to go to college.

I: What were they saying about why you should go to college or consider it?

RB: I don't recall.

I: Did they say anything about getting a better job?

RB: Yes. That was the first thing they always told me. But I wasn't interested. I guess I wanted to be a carpenter from day one.

Learning the Carpentry Trade

I: What might have brought on that desire or that interest?

RB: Working with my hands. My head wasn't too good, but my hands were good. I built this house and moved in here in '55. Then I built several houses, a lot of furniture, and a lot of cabinets--a lot of stuff.

I: At the time when you just out of high

school, how was it possible to learn carpentry skills?

RB: You just had to go to work with a carpenter.

I: Was that easy to do?

RB: No, it wasn't.

I: How did you get your job as a carpenter?

RB: I just went on my own and did it--self-taught.

I: Had you been watching other people doing it?

RB: I suppose. Dad hired a lot of carpenters when he built the hatchery, and then every once in a while he'd get a couple of carpenters to do something, and I always watched them.

I: Did you find you could hammer nails without hitting your thumb most of the time?

RB: After practice.

I: How about doing a straight line with a handsaw?

RB: I could do that.

I: Because that's what you had to. There were no machines.

RB: No machines. I got a job at Newport, on the coast, helping a man build a building. That's the first carpenter job I had. Then I got married. My wife worked in the Union Post Office for twenty-six years.

I: Had she grown up in Union?

RB: No. She was from North Dakota.

I: After you got married, did you come right away to Union?

RB: Yes.

I: Where did you find a place to live?

RB: We lived with Walt and Ma Stevens for a while, and then I found this little house next door [i.e., next to Dick's present home]. We lived there nine years.

I: And you had one room in their house?

RB: Yes.

I: What kind of an arrangement would that be for newlyweds?

RB: It wasn't too neat, but that's the best we could do. We must have lived there with them for a month.

I: Were you earning some money by that time?

RB: Not too much. I had a job working up here at the garage. But that wasn't my thing. I didn't like it. So I went out on my own. Trudy, my wife, finally got a job at the post office and that helped a lot. That's about the time when I started building things for people. I had a pretty good reputation.

I: You were an independent carpenter, not working for a contractor?

RB: Right. I hired somebody once in a while to work for me for a little while. I helped build the big Conley house [on Cove Highway, near Cove] when the Rundle brothers--the same people who built the hatchery--were building that big house out in the valley.

I: But most of the time you were building smaller houses?

RB: Yes.

I: Where'd you get the plans?

RB: [tapping his head] Right there.

I: Were these houses built on speculation?

RB: No, built for somebody.

I: Did you ask them what they wanted? Or was it just living room, dining room, two bedrooms?

RB: Yes, that was it.

I: When you first started building houses, did they include indoor plumbing?

RB: Yes.

I: Where were you getting your materials?

RB: From here at the Oregon Trail Lumber Company. I bought from the Hess Mill.

I: Tell me about that.

Sawmills in Union

RB: G. I. Hess owned a mill here. I worked there for a little while one time. I didn't care for it.

I: Cutting lumber?

RB: I worked on the planer. But the mill shut down and burned down.

I: Was that mill supplying lumber for many parts of Union County or just Union?

RB: They shipped lumber when we had a little railroad. We called that the Dinky. It had several different engines.

I: Why was it called the Dinky? Was it because it was such a short line?

RB: I guess so.

I: It went from where to where?

RB: From Union to Union Junction--to the junction with the Union Pacific tracks. Miller Lane from Union takes you to where the junction was. That road goes on around and comes out at Hot Lake.

I: At this end where did it stop?

RB: At the mill.

I: And the mill again was exactly where?

RB: You just go right straight on the road that follows Catherine Creek--up there a little ways on the right.

I: Wasn't there another mill near the agricultural experiment station?

RB: Yes, that was right here [i.e. Dick's present house]; that was my neighbor.

I: What was that one called?

RB: Ronde Valley.

I: Not Grande Ronde Valley?

RB: Just Ronde Valley.

I: How long do you think it was there?

RB: It's been gone for five or six years. It was probably the 1940s, I'd guess.

I: As far as you know, what kinds of trees were these two mills using?

RB: Tamarack, red fir, pine, and some white fir. I think that's about it.

I: How were they getting the logs out of the woods?

RB: Loading them on a truck and bringing them out. At first it was horses for the Hess Mill. The loggers all had horses then.

I: Did they load the logs on wagons and have the horses pull the wagons?

RB: I guess you'd say that.

I: What do you think was the diameter of most of those trees?

RB: Big. [gestures broadly] Like that.

I: Old growth?

RB: A lot of it was old growth.

I: Maybe three feet in diameter?

RB: Two feet average, I suppose.

I: Do you remember watching the wagon with the horses bringing logs in?

RB: Not too much. They skidded them with horses. Then they cross-hauled them to load them on a wagon.

I: "Cross-hauled"? How does that work?

RB: You put two skids up to the wagon--as flat as they could make them--and with the team on the other side of the wagon, they'd hook onto a log, skid it up there, and load it.

I: How'd they attach the chain or the rope to the log?

RB: They probably just put a loop on each end and dragged it up there, something like that. I don't really remember.

I: Using that method, they could take almost all day to load a wagon.

RB: Yes, it was slow. Then they went to trucks. We called them log trucks; they looked like the pickups we have now. They hauled short logs--a sixteen foot maximum.

I: Do you know how the logs were barked?

RB: No. We had slab wood; that was the bark. They'd just take a slab off of each side.

I: Did the Hess mill, when you were near it, make a lot of noise?

RB: I lived about half a mile up above it, and I never heard it. I could hear the whistle when they blew it at noon whistle. The mill near here made a lot of noise; I was sure glad when they moved that thing.

I: Was it the sound of the saws?

RB: Yes. And the dirt and dust. Sometimes the wind blew dirt out of the yard till I couldn't see the house across the street. I'd have to leave town and go up the creek and wait.

I: Do you remember hearing about accidents in mills around here?

RB: Not too many. I know one guy got killed here.

I: What do you think a mill owner would have done if a man was seriously injured on the job?

RB: He did the best he could--try to get him to a hospital.

I: Would he put out the money for his care?

RB: Yes, usually.

I: To help his family?

RB: Hess would.

I: Did you know Mr. Hess?

RB: I knew him very well. He financed my house.

G.I. Hess, Prominent Union Business Man

I: Tell me more about him--the kind of man he was and his business practices.

RB: He had the Oregon Trail Garage and sold cars. He owned the mill, and his wife owned the land this house is on. He was a pretty sharp guy. I knew him all my life, and my dad knew him because they used to fish together lots of times. When I wanted to build the house, I was working for him at his garage here in Union. I got to thinking about this big vacant lot I was living next to. I went in his office one day and said, "Mr. Hess, I'd like to build a house on your lot." He looked at me. I said, "You'd have to finance me to do it." He sat there a little bit and said, "I'm going to Portland. When I get back on Friday, I want you to have a good set of plans and specifications for a new house and then I'll finance it." He paid for it--paid everything.

I: Who was to live in the house?

RB: Me. I've always lived here.

I: So why would he finance your house?

RB: His wife owned the lot, and the only reason I could think of is he just thought it would be a good thing to do for this guy that lived in that shack [next door], where we'd been living for nine years. That's the only reason I can think of. He just thought, "It'd be a good thing to do; I'll do that." He paid all the bills.

I: Do you think that was common?

RB: No, it wasn't. He wasn't that generous with most people.

I: You were to pay it back?

RB: Yes.

I: So he was your banker.

RB: Yes, that's right.

I: Did he charge interest?

RB: He just told me how much it was, and we put it on a note. I paid it back over the years.

I: Did you sign anything?

RB: No, I don't think so. Just a handshake. He never even came over and looked at the house after I got it done. He told his bookkeeper how much to charge me a month and I paid it off.

I: Did the land come with that deal?

RB: Yes. His wife wanted a house here. I know that.

I: I'd like to hear you talk about the social life and the business life in Union. You've told me that Mr. Hess trusted you and didn't charge interest, which is amazing. That isn't any kind of deal you'd get now. But tell me about how people seemed to feel about one another and what kinds of business dealings they had with one another.

Other Businesses in Union

RB: There were a whole lot of businesses up and down Main Street-- everything from Old Abe, who ran the hat shop, to his garage and the Union Hotel. It was a busy town. This was the main highway --Highway 30. Most people got so they had cars. Some of us still had buggies. They seemed to be compatible; they got along well.

I: When you went into shop at a grocery store or a pharmacy, did you always pay right on the spot?

RB: Sometimes we charged it, but credit was what broke Mr. Haggerty. He gave too much credit.

I: He had a grocery?

RB: Yes, he had a grocery store. He was a good, old man. People came in there and he talked to them: "All right, all right ..." maybe he'd never see them again. They'd just take it and be gone.

I: Took him for a sucker?

RB: Sucker, yes. He went broke and had to move out. Then Westenskow put his grocery store in and Ray Coles, the guy I worked for, bought it. Then I went to work for Carl Posey. I worked for all three of them.

I: Were you a cashier in these stores or stocking the shelves or doing everything?

RB: Everything. I was everything.

I: Tell me a little more about the shopping experience. You must've witnessed a lot of people coming in.

RB: A lot of farmers and people from Pondosa [approximately twenty miles southeast of Union, through a mountainous route] traded in Union. We had a good drugstore and four or five service stations, all of them pretty busy. Before I knew anything about this town, they had a woolen mill four stories high in this part of town; Abe Eaton owned it. There was a flour mill, also about four stories high. They're gone now--everything torn down.

I: Were you in either of those buildings?

RB: I was in the woolen mill after it was abandoned, and I worked in the flour mill a little while.

I: I wanted you to tell me more about the shopping experience in a grocery store.

RB: You had to be friendly, I know that.

I: Why?

RB: Because you wanted them to come back. If you weren't friendly to people, they stayed away.

I: What did being friendly mean at that time? What did you do?

RB: You watched your language, smiled a lot, and helped people all you could, carrying groceries out--just having a friendly appearance, that's all.

I: Did most people shop almost every day?

RB: The main shopping day was Saturday. The mill workers and all the farmers came in, most of them with a horse and buggy or a horse and wagon.

I: What did you put their groceries in?

RB: We used the cardboard boxes that we bought the groceries in.

I: No bags?

RB: We had sacks but no big bags.

I: Did your grocery store include a butcher area?

RB: We also had a butcher shop. When I worked for Ray Coles, they delivered meat from the butcher shop every day, and we had a meat case.

I: How much of the meat, eggs, and chickens were local?

RB: All the eggs were local; some of the meat; chickens they were pretty much homegrown around here. Everybody had a chicken yard.

I: Was milk local?

RB: There were two creameries--Blue Mountain Creamery [in La Grande] and Union Co-op Creamery. They ran trucks and picked up milk all over the valley.

I: There was a movie house in Union, wasn't there?

RB: Yes, the Roxy Theater. It was run by a Mrs. Webb, who owned it. She

couldn't hear anything, and the kids raised hell in the front row. Here came the old lady with a flashlight. They were all silent movies when I went there in the '20s. Somebody played the piano for music. She finally sold it, and it went to talkies. Then they tore the building down.

They tore down everything around here that was worth a damn. We lost both of our schoolhouses, the theater, a lot of houses and some businesses. I don't know why. It just happened.

I: In the Roxy Theater how many performances were there a week?

RB: As I remember, every night.

I: And would people fill the place?

RB: Pretty much. If she showed movies with Hoot Gibson or Richard Dix or some of those old-timers, they'd come to watch them, though they weren't much of a movie.

I: Were there any kinds of traveling shows that came to Union?

RB: Every once in a while there was a tent show. I remember one of them was Toby Tyler; I sneaked into that one.

I: What did he do?

RB: He was a comedian, who told a lot of corny jokes and had a funny uniform. I remember several tent shows that set up where the old South School was.

I: Was this kind of show something that almost everybody in town would come to?

RB: Pretty nearly.

I: There was no better entertainment available?

RB: That's all there was.

I: How often would people go to La Grande either for shopping or entertainment?

RB: Too often. Too often.

I: What do you mean by that?

RB: They would pass the merchants here and go to La Grande and spend their money.

I: When did that start happening?

RB: Whenever they got cars.

I: Of course, there were cars from early part of the twentieth century.

RB: No, we didn't have cars. Most people had a horse or a buggy or wagon. Main Street had hitch racks, and there was no pavement then. Everybody would come and tie up at the damn hitch racks. I used to do that. I had a horse.

I: Who cleaned up after the horses?

RB: Ed Sherman was the street commissioner. He had an old white team.

I: A shovel and a bucket?

RB: A shovel and a bucket, yes. Then we got Charlie Hanson. He graduated to a wheelbarrow. It was pretty primitive.

Shopping in La Grande

I: Why do you think, once people had cars, they thought that La Grande was more appealing for shopping?

RB: Bigger stores--one thing or another.

I: Could they get things there that they couldn't get in Union?

RB: You still can.

I: Give me a couple of examples from longer ago.

RB: My mother made a lot of the clothes for my two little sisters, my two brothers, and me; she had to go to La Grande to get material. We had two clothing stores here, but for some reason she wanted to go to La Grande. Maybe it was just to get out of the house.

I: Did that have the effect of causing some of the businesses in Union to go out of business?

Prejudicial Attitudes in Union

RB: Yes. One was Levy--a nice guy. The whole family--Mick, Leon, Edna, and Stella--ran the store. But a lot of people didn't go to their store. I don't really know why.

I: Prejudice?

RB: Prejudice, probably, but they were nice people. I liked them. When I got sick with typhoid fever, I was in Hot Lake Sanatorium for four months and when I got home, old Mick came up and brought a big, white cake.

I: Were there any black people living in Union?

RB: Just one or two. They never were prevalent. An old guy named Willy Torrance lived at the junction [i.e., Union Junction, west of Union]. Every night he walked to town winter or summer to buy a few groceries for supper and walked back. I liked the old man and talked to him a few times. He had a son named Willy Torrance, who went to La Grande High School.

I: I think he became a well-known football player.

RB: Yes, he did.

I: What did Willy Sr. do for work?

RB: He worked on the section [i.e., section of railroad track]. That's where the section hands lived.

I: What do you think was the attitude of most people in Union about people with black skin?

RB: Not too good in the early days.

I: Did you ever hear comments?

RB: "Niggers, niggers, niggers." Every one of them was a nigger. I still don't think that's right. They're people. I've still got friends that call them niggers. I straighten them out once in a while, but it doesn't do any good.

I: At least you let them know where you stand.

Dick's Stay in Hot Lake Sanatorium

I: You mentioned being in Hot Lake.

RB: Four months with typhoid fever.

I: Where do you think you got typhoid fever and why?

RB: From a carrier. I was working on Campbell's ranch up the creek, and an old lady, Mrs. Loveland, was cooking there. Four of us got typhoid fever. They finally discovered that she was the source, so they isolated her in a little house in La Grande. I guess she lived there till she died.

I: What were your symptoms?

RB: I had fever. I came down with it on the Minam River; I had horsebacked way into the mountains and, boy, I got sick. I didn't get all the way home--just to the Campbell ranch--I'd been working there --and went in there. Nobody was home so I went to bed on a couch. When somebody found me, I was delirious, I guess. So they called Dad.

I: When did that happen?

RB: 1931, when I was sixteen. They took me to Hot Lake and kept me there four months. That was a miserable time--no air-conditioning. They put me on the brick side of that hot building, where there was no air. I'd just liked to died.

I: How were they treating you?

RB: The best they could.

I: I mean what were they doing?

RB: They didn't feed me much--just a little bowl of jello, a little bowl of applesauce drained through a rag, and a glass of milk once a day. I went from a hundred and thirty pounds down to eighty pounds before I got out of there. The doctor explained to me the reason they couldn't feed me solid food was that my intestines were so thin that regular food would break them and that would be it. So that was the reason, I guess.

I: Were you lying down all the time?

RB: Yes. I was so weak I could hardly turn over in bed.

I: Were you in a room with other people?

RB: No. I was isolated because it was contagious.

I: Tell me about the nursing.

RB: I don't remember too much about them. I guess they were good nurses. One old lady I didn't like, but that don't make her a bad nurse. They did the best they could.

I: Were you able to get out of the bed to go to the toilet?

RB: No. I had a bedpan. That was a miserable experience.

I: Do you remember any other details about being in Hot Lake? The sounds you heard? Smells? Other patients?

RB: They put me in a room right next to the diet kitchen. I could smell that food all day long and I couldn't have any of it.

I: Did it smell good?

RB: Oh, it was wonderful! That was bad planning. I think they should have put me someplace down the hall.

I: Did you improve gradually?

RB: I got to where they'd get me up in a wheelchair and take me out on the veranda, but they left me out there for too long. I'd get to shaking. I guess they did that on purpose so I would get stronger.

I: Did you talk to other patients?

RB: No. I wasn't allowed to. Even the doctor washed his hands before he left the room.

I: How did they decide, as far as you know, that you weren't contagious anymore?

RB: My mother came over every day to see me. She couldn't drive, but somebody brought her. I think they told her that I was ready to come home because she came over with my brother, brought me home, and put me right to bed.

I: What else do you remember about Hot Lake?

RB: It was just like a little town. They had a pharmacy, a restaurant, and a whole lot of things there. It was quite a place. The doctor had a chauffeur and a little car, all in a town. But they eventually kind of wilted away, I guess.

I: Could you smell the lake?

RB: Yes. I went to the springhouse after I got better. My dad took me over there for a checkup or something, and we went out to the springhouse and drank a little bit of that old stinking water.

I: Do you think that experience could have had any affect on how you felt about high school?

RB: It might have been. I missed half a year. I was there all summer and part of the winter. When I went back to school, the teachers told me I did a lot better after I lost a half a year so they let me graduate with three and a half years. I tried hard. The thing about it was I liked manual training and took two periods of that.

I: That's where you learned how to be a carpenter.

RB: That was part of it, yes. Old man Baxter was our instructor and he taught me a lot.

Depression-era Experiences

I: Maybe you'd like to talk a little more about conditions during the Depression --experiences you had directly as well as things you observed about how the Depression was affecting people.

RB: I know a lot of fellows who were working for a dollar a day pitching hay and damn glad to get it. They had three or four kids, and how they made it I don't know. They were renting a house. How do you do that on a dollar a day?

I: Bartering, perhaps?

RB: They probably did. Probably raised a garden. Maybe they had a cow or hog. But they never seemed to get down. They were always cheerful.

I: Did you ever see people begging?

RB: There was lots of traffic from Arkansas and different places going through here --destitute people. They'd come to the store and say, "Could you spare a loaf of bread or anything?" Old man Haggerty got irritated, but he'd usually do it.

I: What kinds of cars or trucks were they in?

RB: You could hardly tell what they looked like they were so covered up with old crap--old furniture and mattresses and all that stuff.

I: Where were they going?

RB: I guess the Willamette Valley. It was hand to mouth. They'd probably been begging since they left Arkansas or wherever they came from to get by.

I: How did you feel about seeing them?

RB: It was depressing. When I saw one of them come through the door, with old clothes on, I thought, "Oh god, here comes another one." They were kind of smelly and dirty. Four, five, or six little kids in the back of an old truck. It wasn't a good life.

I: Did any of them stick around Union for awhile?

RB: Yes. I think some guys are here yet. I can't remember just who all they are, but I know we'd call them Arkies or Okies.

I: Did they stay because they thought they could get a job here?

RB: Some of them did get a job in the mill. They couldn't hire too many because they had their own people to take care of. It was a sad time--a really sad time.

We had a family whose name, I think, was Nelson. Grandma Nelson was a little old country woman with no teeth. She had three little grandkids out there trying to live in a house. She'd come to the store and order a bunch of groceries. I took them out because I was the delivery boy. Bill said, "You get the money. Don't let her get you out without giving you the money." When I got out there, the old lady didn't have any money. She said, "I could pay you sooner or later, but I don't have any money now." So I paid the bill out of my pocket. I never told Bill Haggerty. I just told him I got some money. When the old lady come in about a month later to pay that bill, it had already been paid. She said, "Who paid it?" Bill knew I paid it, I guess. He said, "He paid it." That old lady was really grateful for it. I think she died right soon after that. I don't know whatever happened to the little bitty kids. Every time I took something there, boy, they were all looking in the grocery box. I could tell they were hungry.

I didn't notice it too much because I usually had a job. It wasn't a good job, but I had a job.

Working at the Union Hotel

RB: I know at the end of the Depression I was looking for work, and the lady that ran the Union Hotel offered me a job for a dollar a day, seven days a week, twelve hours a day. I had to scrub the floor every night--that big, old white floor in that hotel.

I: The lobby.

RB: I had to scrub that.

I: What else did you have to do?

RB: I had to keep the furnace going, which was a job. We were burning sawdust, as I remember. Then I had to wait on people, of course.

I: Doing what?

RB: Clerk at the desk, renting rooms.

I: What kinds of people who were coming through typically stayed at the hotel?

RB: We had traveling salesmen--lots of salesmen then. If you worked for Swift and Company, for instance, you had to be on the road.

Union Hotel, 1920s
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

I: I'll bet they were in shinier cars and were dressed better.

RB: They were. They weren't tramps.

I: Do you think that for the time this was a really quite good hotel?

RB: It was a good hotel, a dandy.

I: At the time you were there was a restaurant a part of it?

RB: Yes.

I: Can you describe it?

RB: It was a beautiful dining room with all white linen. They cooked on a long woodstove, and it was pretty damn good cooking.

I: Did you ever eat there?

RB: That's where I ate my meals. They had three waitresses, I remember, that worked in the restaurant part. Dave Baum's sister--I went to school with her --was working there as a waitress and a girl named Vivian Jorry. She went walking in her sleep. I'd be sitting there at the desk, maybe midnight or after, and here she'd come out of her room, her eyes plumb shut, and walk around the lobby. I'd go over and wake her up. "Oh! Did I do that again?" she'd say.

I: While you were working there, were there events in the parlor?

RB: They had a lot of things going on.

I: Like what?

RB: Dances and some guys came through lecturing--odds and ends of things.

I: Was that a better place for those kinds of things than the Roxy Theater?

RB: Yes because all it had were little old seats. I remember that old theater had a Farmer Night every week where they'd give away groceries. Of course that was costing the merchants downtown.

It's been a good town to me--a really good town.

I: Why do you say that?

RB: I've lived here eighty-five years. I've always been able to get a job, and I've had all kinds of friends here, lots of friends. Of course, they're all gone now, but I had a lot of friends.

Square Dancing and Calling

RB: I called square dances for fifteen years.

I: Tell me where they were held.

RB: At the Sportsman's Club, near the old hatchery.

I: Is that still there?

RB: Yes.

I: Is it kind of a meeting hall?

RB: A lot of people use it for that.

I: What kind of condition is it in?

RB: Pretty good, I think.

I: You don't just start calling square dancing out of nowhere. How did you learn?

RB: It wasn't easy. It took me quite a while.

I: Had you done a lot of square dancing before?

RB: No. I watched them. When I was a little kid, we square danced some. We called it square dancing; I don't think it was. My friend Don Gale was a caller.

I: Miskell Gale's husband?

RB: Miskell's husband. He talked me into going up there and taking some lessons. I did and learned to square dance and then I had to learn to call. That took a little while, but I caught on pretty well. I never called a square dance when I didn't fill the hall, I'll tell you that. Everybody would dance to me, pretty near everybody.

I: What do you think you did that made you more popular?

RB: I had a good, strong voice. And I did a lot of singing calls; that's important. I could sing then, but I can't now because I can hardly breathe. [Dick uses an oxygen tank twenty-four hours a day.] I sang in the choir at church for a while. So I knew I could sing.

I: Did you ever take singing lessons in Union?

RB: No, it was just natural.

I: I suppose you were paid for square dance calling.

RB: No. I paid a dollar every time I went to a square dance. They didn't pay callers unless it was a caller from out of town--a traveling caller; they paid him, of course.

I: If you got the biggest crowd, why didn't they pay you?

RB: We had a club and I was part of a club. Several of us who called never got paid.

I: Describe for me, if you would, a typical Saturday evening. How did the people dress when they came?

RB: The women all had blue dresses--part of their uniform for square dancing. The men had ordinary clothes. Then it got to where the women would come in slacks, and that kind of spoiled it. You used to see the whole hall of just blue dresses. It was beautiful.

I: Dresses they made?

RB: Yes, some of them. My wife had one, but I guess she gave it away.

I: Did these people come early in the evening, maybe at 7:00?

RB: Something like that.

I: Were there musicians there?

RB: We used a phonograph. It was cheaper. I've still got it out there in the garage.

I: Did you have a certain pattern or series of dances that you always went through each time?

RB: No, I had about a hundred records.

I: What did you do for the people who didn't know some of the dances? Did you teach them?

RB: We had an instruction session on a different night.

I: About how long did people dance continuously? An hour?

RB: Yes.

I: And then what?

RB: You go home.

I: No drinks or food?

RB: Yes, we always had that. At every dance we had a dinner afterwards, pretty nearly every time.

I: Who made the dinners?

RB: Mostly potluck, I think.

I: What were some of the dishes people brought?

RB: Cakes and pies and salads, casseroles, beans--everything.

I: Who supplied all the plates, forks, and knives?

RB: The Sportsmen's Club has them right in their kitchen.

I: Did the men help wash the dishes afterwards?

RB: Very seldom.

I: What did the men do while the women were cleaning up?

RB: Just sitting around and talking; some of them went home.

I: Did you see any liquor at those dances?

RB: No. That was taboo. We had a couple of guys who came there a little tipsy, but they had to quit that.

I: If a guy brought a bottle, then you kicked him out?

RB: He knew better than to bring it in. It was a clean sport, let's put it that way. It was clean. All in all it was a wonderful thing to do for people.

I: Were you doing this pretty much fifty-two weeks a year?

RB: Pretty much, yes. I'd call here and sometimes I'd call in La Grande or Elgin or Baker.

I: Did they pay you?

RB: No. It was all volunteer.

I: They didn't even pay for your gas to get there?

RB: No.

I: You gave a lot.

RB: All the callers had to do it.

I: Did you prefer calling to dancing?

RB: Yes, I really did, though I danced quite a bit. I really enjoyed it because the people were so friendly to me. They'd all want to dance when I called, but we had some callers who couldn't get people out. They just didn't have it, I guess.

I: Some callers are easier to follow than others, I suppose.

RB: Oh, yes.

I: What do you think was the most popular period for square dancing?

RB: We haven't square danced for six, seven, eight years. Probably for twenty-five years it was popular, and then it kind of died out.

I: Was it popular when you were a little kid?

RB: No, I don't think so. A guy came through here, a professional caller, and taught people here to call square dances. That's where it all started.

I: I think that this must've been fairly common throughout the county.

RB: It was.

I: What might be the age range of people who would come usually?

RB: Anywhere from probably fifteen to eighty-five. We had some really old dancers. My god, they could dance, too!

I: Did many people come alone?

RB: We had two or three that came alone.

I: The kids who were fifteen probably

came alone, or would they bring a boyfriend or a girlfriend?

RB: Usually. But they didn't last too long. They wanted to do something else. It was kind of boring for them, I guess.

I: So mostly people in their twenties, thirties, forties?

RB: Yes, right along in there.

I: Why did square dancing become less popular?

RB: In our club we got some people in there that tore it up. How would I put it? They just wore it out--took over, took charge--and they didn't know what they were doing. People just drifted away. You've got to know what you're doing if you're going to run something, you know. We had one woman in particular. Boy, she was a fright! She'd been to square dances about six weeks and hadn't learned; she couldn't dance. But she got up and said, "There's a lot of problems with this club, but we're gonna straighten 'em out." By god, that did it. It just about ruined us. People said, "Hell with her." Two women were that way, and they finally wore it clear out.

Union's Sportsman's Club

I: Were you involved with any other kinds of clubs or organizations in Union?

RB: Sportsmen's Club.

I: Tell me about that. It sounds like fishing.

RB: Fishing, hunting.

I: What was the purpose of the club?

RB: It was just a bunch of sportsmen who got together. My dad was president for awhile, and they had dances in the Sportsmen's Club. My dad played for them; he was a fiddler. Every year they had a clam feed or a crab feed--a big, big deal. I guess that was just about it.

I: It wasn't anything like an Elks Club?

RB: No, they were just a bunch of old red necks having a good time.

I: Do you think most of the guys around here were rednecks?

RB: Not most of them, but we had a few.

Political Views

I: What did you notice about political activities here? Were you aware of Republicans, Democrats, maybe other parties?

RB: I wasn't much on politics. My dad wasn't either. He said, "I'm not smart like those guys."

I: Did you vote?

RB: Yes, I've always voted.

I: You must have been reading things or hearing things that influenced the way you voted.

RB: And sometimes it was just an opinion I had on my own--somebody I liked or didn't like.

I: Given what you noticed during the Depression, what was your opinion about Franklin D. Roosevelt?

RB: I liked him. I really did.

I: Because?

RB: It seemed he got things moving more than anybody else. He had the different organizations, like the WPA [i.e., Works Progress Administration] and so on, and he got them moving. I thought he was a nice man, pretty good guy.

I: When the Second World War began and the country changed in many ways, did you start thinking about politics in any different ways?

RB: I went right in the Navy as soon as I could. I didn't know much about politics then. I was out to sea all the time on an old, worn out World War I destroyer.

I: When you came back, Franklin Roosevelt was in his fourth term and Wendell Wilkie had opposed him a few years before. Harry Truman was vice-president, and then Roosevelt died all of a sudden and Harry Truman became president. That shook a lot of people up. How about you?

RB: Didn't bother me.

I: No? What did you think? What did you know about him?

RB: I used to hear him on the radio quite often. I'd read in the papers certain things he'd done or wanted to do. Just kind of formed an opinion, I guess.

A Union Newspaper

I: One of the reasons I'm asking you is that I know that for a number of years there was a newspaper in Union called the *Union Republican*. I've read some of the issues of it. It was pretty straight-line Republican thinking. Did those opinions affect you or many other people in town?

RB: I don't think so. Not very much. He was just an old country guy that published a newspaper, and that's the way he looked at it. There were several publishers, all old men--Syberd and Lewis and Don McPherson. About five or six people published that paper. The last one finally just faded out.

I: Over the years that you were here, do you think that Union was leaning more Republican or Democrat?

RB: I think Republican, but I'm not sure.

I: In the past did you read it?

RB: No. I didn't pay much attention.

I: Did you read *The Observer*?

RB: Some.

I: How about *The Oregonian* or *The Journal*?

RB: We always took *The Oregonian*. That was Republican.

I: Was that your main source of news?

RB: Yes.

Union's Churches and Morality in Union

I: Can you tell me something about your observations of churches in Union?

RB: They tell me one time there were eight of them. I don't know about that for sure, but there were the Adventist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, LDS, and Catholic. The Presbyterian Church is where I started Sunday School. It was where Gravy Dave's restaurant is now. It was a beautiful old church. I guess they ran out of Presbyterians so they tore it down.

I: Do you think, with all these churches, that almost everybody in Union belonged to at least one?

RB: Pretty near had to. We had only about a thousand people then. I know the Mormon church was pretty strong.

I: During the years that you were involved, what do you think were some of the contributions that churches made to the community?

RB: The Methodist Church, where I belong now, in years past had a lot more people than it has now. It had some people with money, and they contributed quite a bit to everything.

I: What did the churches do for the community?

RB: That's kind of hard to answer. We had ice cream socials and donated the money to somebody.

I: I'll put it more specifically. Do you think that the churches in some way cut down on immoral or illegal activity in Union?

RB: I think they did at one time, yes.

I: You didn't see or know about much immoral activity?

RB: Not too much, no.

I: Never a house of prostitution?

RB: I didn't know about it if there was.

I: Drinking?

RB: We've always had a few drunks.

I: Isolated cases?

RB: Yes, isolated cases.

I: What was going on in the high school? Was drinking common?

RB: No. We didn't drink. We just didn't do it.

I: Do you think that was related to the churches' influence?

RB: I believe it was, some. I don't know about the Baptist and the Catholic churches, but in the Methodist and the Presbyterian, we didn't do that--when I was younger, that is.

I: So can you honestly say that in all those earlier years, when you were walking the streets of Union, you didn't see anything going on that you thought was questionable activity?

RB: I saw a few fights that were questionable.

I: Not gang fights, just a couple of men?

RB: Just settle a grudge.

I: Had police activity been noticeable around here?

RB: It's more noticeable now than it ever was. The first marshall I remember had an old, white horse and buggy; that was his police car. He was a pretty good, old guy, but if you got too rough he'd put you in jail.

I: Where was the jail?

RB: Right in back of the city hall.

I: Did you ever see inside it?

RB: Yes, I've been inside it. Not legally, I wasn't towed in. I just went in there with some other kids to look at it.

I: How many cells?

RB: Just one.

I: With bunks?

RB: Yes, it had a bunk.

I: And a pail to pee in?

RB: I don't know about that.

I: I don't suppose people would stay in the jail for more than a couple of days.

RB: No. If there was something pretty serious, they always sent them to La Grande because they had a better court and everything over there.

Fire Fighting in Union

I: Do you remember any important fires in the business district?

I: What kind of equipment did Union have to try to put out a fire?

RB: They had a hose wagon, run by man power. You had to grab on and run like hell.

I: It was a hand pump?

RB: Yes, it had a hand pump to fill it. At the north end of town they had one fire bell up on a little platform. And at the south end up on city hall there was a fire bell. That was it. I knew some of those old fellows that were in the fire department, and, boy, they could run with that wagon!

I: They were all volunteers, I suppose.

RB: Volunteers, absolutely.

I: Did you ever go to a fire and watch what they did?

RB: I went to several. I was in the fire department for a little while, before the war, I guess. When I left, they took me off, of course.

I: Can you describe one of those fires and what went on?

RB: Just a lot of smoke and a lot of hollering and dragging hoses here and there and squirting water around.

I: Did people come from all over town to watch?

RB: A lot of times they did. Sometimes the cops would have to run them off. We had a fire out in north Union that burned up a baby. I can't remember just what the particulars were there.

I: At that time did firemen try to rescue anybody who was inside?

RB: They tried to do their job.

I: Where do you think they got training?

RB: They didn't get trained. They trained themselves. I suppose the chief gave them a lecture, but I never had any training when I was on it.

I: Why did you agree to do it?

RB: They needed a firemen, I guess, and I said I'd do it. I went to several of their meetings, and I went to a couple or three of their fires. The old Halsey house: I went to that one. Then I went to the Navy. When I came back, somebody else had my badge and I said, "You just keep that badge."

Serving on Union's School Board

I: You said, too, that you were on the school board for a while.

RB: Yes.

I: How did that come about?

RB: I just decided I could help the school.

I: You said you didn't like school much.

RB: I didn't, but I learned better after I got out. I found it was a valuable experience for anybody. I was on the board about four years, I think.

I: About what period was that?

RB: I was married in 1946, so it was the early '50s. Those guys are all dead now.

I: What were some of the things you had to decide?

RB: A big thing we had to decide is where to get the money and where to spend it. That was the big thing.

I: In addition to state money?

RB: Yes.

I: You needed more for what?

RB: For gymnasiums and to build things. We had to put a new roof on. That's expensive.

I: So did this involve having a levy?

RB: Yes, we had to have a levy.

I: Did you have to go out and talk to people to persuade them?

RB: I didn't say much. No, I didn't. They could either do it or they … We had a couple of sourballs [i.e., board members] on there with me that I didn't like very well. They fought everything. One of them, when we'd have to spend, say, $20,000 for something, said "That will cost me too much" and he'd vote against it every time. He didn't belong on the school board, but he was there.

I: Did your school board meetings ever involve anything that was going on in classrooms?

RB: Every once in a while a teacher would talk to us about something going on.

I: To inform you about how they were teaching geometry or whatever?

RB: Yes. And sometimes they had a problem with a couple of students. We had to kick a couple of them out.

I: Usually the principal or the superintendent does that. Why did the school board have to be involved?

RB: We had to approve it before he could do it.

I: You mean kick him out permanently?

RB: No, just a suspension. I remember two students we had to do that to, and they came back pretty good kids.

I: What was your judgment about how much interest most people in the community had in schools?

RB: Not very much until we had a problem, and then everybody had an opinion. That's difficult.

I: A problem usually involving money?

RB: Usually money. When things are going all right, they leave you alone. When we had to have a levy, that got a lot of criticism always.

I: Why did the school board and the school administrators decide to keep the high school pretty much the way it has always been--probably since about 1910. Why did they decide not to tear that down but just to touch it up a little?

RB: I know one thing. We'd have run into a hell of a lot of opposition if we ever tried it. You don't know how people can turn on you. One of your best friends could tell you off because you were on the school board.

I: Why did people feel so strongly about the high school building?

RB: I think Merton Davis told me he went to the first freshman class there in 1910. So it's pretty old and it's pretty solid. We've done some improving lately--new restrooms and things like that that were old-fashioned. But if we started to tear it down, good god, you'd have to leave town! Oh, it'd be terrible!

Union's Pull on Dick Bonney

I: Go back to when you said that you've lived in Union for about eighty-five years. You've made a lot of friends here, and you haven't apparently wanted to move away. Is there anything else you could say about Union that makes it so significant to you?

RB: Memories.

I: Of?

RB: People. All the merchants up and down the street and people that lived … Just memories of good people. That's the main thing, I think. I've just known that we've always had good people.

I: Does that have to do maybe with the location or size of Union? Or is there any other thing you can put your finger on to say why it's different from other places?

RB: Not really. It's about two thousand now. It was about a thousand when I came here. I really can't answer that. It's just that I like it.

I: It's a feeling?

RB: It's a feeling, yes.

I: Have you ever been tempted to move away?

RB: No. I moved away once and I came back. We built this little house and we lived here since '55. I'm pretty happy just right here. There's a few people around that I like. A lot of them are gone, of course, but there are a few that help me out once in a while if I need them and talk to me and are good to me.

I: Have you ever felt lonely here?

RB: Ever since my wife died, this is a lonely house. But you've got to live with it. You can't do anything about it. We had fifty-one wonderful years ...

Appendix A
Verses Composed by Dick Bonney

At the end of the interview, Dick showed the interviewer a bound book containing verses he had written and gave his permission to include them with the interview transcript. In talking about how he came to write them, he said:

I got started writing poems as a kid. Teachers didn't ask me to write poems. It was my idea. It seemed to be easier to write poems rather than stories. I didn't pay any attention to rhyme or the number of lines. After the war, I couldn't find anything I had written.

After I retired, when I was sixty-two, I used to go up to the park--Presbyterian Flat, about eight miles from Union--intending to write, and sit there and write. I took a notebook and pencil, writing everything in longhand. I got a kick out of writing. I really did. I enjoyed it. When my wife died, I lost all desire to write, though she hadn't encouraged me much.

He also talked about each verse. Those comments precede each one on the following pages.

I'ver always been the kind of guy that wanted to be out in the woods. I went in the woods every chance I got, maybe for a week or so. I thought, "We're destroying our timber." You go up where the timber's been beautiful, and you see nothing but stumps--clearcuts.

A Prophecy and a Simple Warning

When the last grouse drums
On the very last log
And the last wolf talks to the moon
When dry rivers have lost their way
And they make no pond for the loon
When the Kingfisher rattles but there are no fish
Then his name means nothing you see.
Now think a while of the way it is
And the way it's going to be.

When the last chain saw is rusted
And its terrible music is stilled
There will be no place to apologize
For the beautiful world it killed.
The roots are dead, the trees are gone
No place for the wind to sing its song.
Now the dust devils dance
Where the forest once stood
There is nothing left
Just some rotten wood.

When the green is gone
And the ground is bare
There will be no bird-song
To sweeten the air.
Then all the creatures have lost their home
They have no place to live.
Nature has done all that she can do
She has no more to give.

I think I was in a sour mood the day I wrote this. I had just realized I was getting old, I think. There were a lot of things I couldn't do anymore, like yardwork. or riding a horse--things I had to quit. I had a lung problem, too, from fifty-one years of smoking cigarettes. That'll kill most people. That means I'm tough, not smart. Another part of the lung problem was the sawmill that was just across the ditch from my house. Sometimes they made so much dust I couldn't see anything. When the doctor told me I was getting very short-winded, I told my wife, "I've got to quit smoking." That day I went from four packs a day to nothing.

Ever since my wife died, I've felt lonely. Some younger people talk to me and open the door for me; other slam the door in my face and walk off. I get the idea they think I'm old and useless.

The Golden Years??

Old age can be very lonesome
Even with folks around.
The old and the young are different
They have little common ground.
I've seen old folks just set and stare
And watch what's going by.
Yet the young folks never notice
There is a lonely look in their eye.

When passing by, if they would smile
Or even stop and visit a while,
It might help make an old heart glad
And remember young folks aren't all bad.
Yes I wonder why they cannot see
The loneliness in folks like me.

Our passing scene is nearly gone
It shortens every day.
Their busy life will continue on
After we are laid away
So think about it, you who are young
You will be old some day.
Then you will wonder why no one
Stops, to pass the time of day.

My church was having a big fight. They got a minister they didn't like and he wasn't helping any, so I came home and told my wife, "I'm not going back." It didn't have to do with my religious beliefs; it was just disgust with the people. I'd been going to church since I was about six years old. My grandfather was a circuit-riding preacher in the Willamette Valley.

My Choice

I used to go to church, you know
But anymore I just don't go.
My reasons are not always clear
And I wonder about the things I hear.
The preacher's nice and the folks are good
Now this I've never understood:

Why Sunday's the day to wear good clothes
For psalms, hymns and religious prose,
For greeting folks and wishing them well
Wondering how many are bound for Hell.

People must see something good you know
Or a whole lot more of us wouldn't go.
For the fancy words the preachers use
Never help to soften the pews.
I've sinned my share I have no doubt
But that's part of what living is all about.
I hope the Lord can understand
I'm not completely out of hand.

Well, I've set back and I can see
The Holy House is not for me.
I'm probably blessed as well as those
Who go to church in Sunday clothes.
They bow their heads and bend their knees
Then ask for a lot of favors please
And thank the Lord an awful lot
For things they never really got.

A church to me can be anywhere
I don't think the Lord will really care
If I'm out in the woods and under a tree
I know he still can tell it's me.

When I was in the Navy, I was in Seattle and went out to the zoo. There were a lot of people there, one of them an older black man--in the days before black freedom.He walked by the bench where I was sitting--about three times. Pretty soon he took off his hat and said, "Mister, do you care if I sit on that bench with you?" I said, "Help yourself." Then he started talking to me. It amazes me how bitter people can be about something they don't know anything about.

Of Black and White

I met a man just yesterday
His skin was black as coal
We visited a while and he revealed
That he too had a soul,
He slowly leaned back
With his hands behind his head
He turned his eyes to look at me
Then this is what he said:

It hurts to be put down
Because my skin is black.
That hurting weighs upon my soul
Like the world's upon my back
The flowers are different colors.
You see, He made those too.
He made different colored people
Just like me and you.

My love for folks has nothing to do
With the color of their skin.
God made us all, I'm sure of that
So it seems we must be kin.
God was not so colorblind that he
Could not tell you from me.
Now hatred based on black or white
Was not his intent you see.

White Christian folks still push us aside
They say we should know our place.
They seem to know where I belong
By the color on my face.
Yes it's hard to be a black man
In a Christian white man's town
They might be Christian people
But they still can keep you down.

Deefy Jones was a civil war veteran, who lived in a shacky house in Union--kind of like a barn. I always walked by it on the way to school. He made cider, and Dad sent me down there a couple of times to buy a jug of cider. I talked to him though he wasn't the most personable man. One day he gave me an apple from his apple orchard. He was old and didn't have any friends, except one other old man who could hardly hear either; they got together to make cider. The kids picked on him, made him miserable. One time I walked by his little shed and he shot a shotgun right across in front of my face at some kids across the street. That scared the hell out of me.

I Remember Deefy Jones

I remember Deefy Jones
He lived just west of us
He was a Civil War veteran
Kind of a lonely old cuss.
He might have had a friend or two
But if they ever came to see him
I can't remember who
He had an old farm wagon
And an aging old bay horse
He had cats, pigs, and chickens
And an old, old dog of course

He sold eggs and fruit and honey
From the tailgate of his rig
Yes, he once gave me an apple
When I wasn't very big
He made himself a friend that day
That friendship lasted till he died
They buried him in a pauper's grave
I was the only one who cried.

Dad never talked about religion, though he was a preacher's son. He never had anything to do with church. I never did read the Bible.

Dust on Mamma's Bible

I remember Mamma's Bible
Where it lay upon its stand
While she counseled all her children
She kept it close at hand
You could tell her favorite passage
By the way the page was worn
She read her good book faithfully
Every night and every morn

She taught us many things
Like gentleness and love the Lord
To read this Bible daily
And rely upon its word
To try to live the ten commandments
To respect your fellow man
She knew we couldn't be perfect
But please do the best you can

One dark day Mamma left us
I suppose she's looking down
Wondering about her children,
Now that they are grown
Well I think we did the best we could
But one place we went astray
There has been dust on Mamma's Bible
Ever since she passed away

My dad was a pet lover. We had porcupines and badger, a coyote, a hoot owl--wild things but they make pets. I've always felt close to Nature. I've tried hunting but I didn't like that.

My Wilderness Home

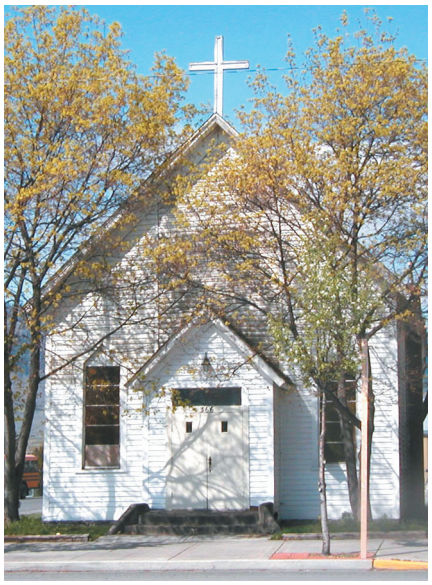
I'll build me a shelter of widespreading trees
Where the wind sighs softly through the shingling leaves
Create a floor of sweet forest loam
That is what I'll need for my wilderness home
The music of a brook as it ripples on by
With the moonlight and soft glow in a star-sprinkled sky
Nature's own garden where bright flowers grow
The smile of the crocuses through the late spring snow
A meadow with crickets and their shrill daytime song
With the peep of the swamp frog most all night long
A butterfly's beauty in the warm sunlight
And the bouncing trail of a firefly's flight
Now neighbors I'll need, friendly ones though
A marmot, a chipmunk, a robin, a crow
A standoffish coyote, a raccoon or two
A soft stopping doe with a small fawn will do
A fierce old owl that will glide through the night
And frighten wee creatures into scurrying flight
I hope the summers are very very long
A bluebird for happiness, a meadowlark for song
A place where all creatures of nature can roam
That's all I need for my wilderness home.

Appendix B
A Guided Tour of Historically Significant Buildings in Union
Tour guide: Dick Bonney,
with assistance from
Carolyn Young (who loaned old photos of Union)
& Helen Fitzgerald

2004 & 05 photos by Eugene Smith

This is one of the barns at the Agricultural Experiment Station. I put a new roof on it several years ago.

This is a building from the late 1800s that was built for a brewery. It has about a dozen signs painted on the side. Dave Kent, who lived here years ago, was a sign painter and painted all these signs. There was a garage there in the 1920s, and it's now used as a bus garage. The foundation is rocks piled up, similar to many of the old buildings; they didn't have cement, I guess.



This was the Methodist Church, dedicated in 1873. The Methodists built a new church in 1904-05 and sold this one to the Catholics. The Union County Museum owns it now and hopes to restore it.

Merton & Eleanor Davis Collection

Union's Main Street before 1891, taken from location of old brewery (left foreground), looking north; the first Methodist Church, with bell tower, is second building on left.

Merton & Eleanor Davis Collection

Union's Main Street about 1900, looking south; note steeples on both City Hall and the first Methodist Church.

Masonic Hall at right foregound; compare with 2004 photo on p. 46.

This is the City Hall. It has a jail that was used for people who committed petty crimes, like drunkenness. The serious criminals went to La Grande.

Levy's general store was here for years--clothing, groceries, and everything you could want. They did a pretty good trade. I can still see Leon standing out there with a little black hat and black clothes, his hands behind him, staring down the street. He'd stand there about half a day at a time, just looking down the street. His dad, Adolph Levy, built the building.

Edna Levy, his sister, kept house; Stella Levy, another sister, ran the dry goods department into the 1940s.

The store had a pull cord with a metal container for money that went on a wire to the upstairs office.

The Levy horse barns, a few blocks west of Main Street. One of the Levy sons, Mick, raised and showed Shetland ponies at the Union Stock Show in the 1920 and 30s. He also maintained a collection of buggies and other horse equipment upstairs in one of the three barns.

This is the Masonic Hall--Masonic Lodge #56, formed in 1872. The corner stone was laid August 16, 1898; the building was dedicated December 24, 1898.

At one time the Townley Mercantile Store was at street level; by about 1930 the store was converted to a grocery by a Mrs. Martin and her son, Clark.

First National Bank of Union formerly occupied the left side of this building; now the whole thing is the Union County Museum.

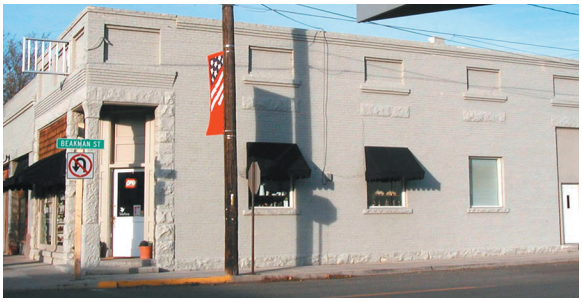
The first floor of the two-story part of the building had always been a bank before it became part of the museum; the second floor was the meeting place of a lodge.

Entrance to the Union Museum, located to the immediate right of the building in the photo above. The wooden-faced structure was a roller skating rink and had also housed Ivan's Food Store for many years.

Originally, this was a harness shop, run by old man Holly. He always wore a black suit, a necktie, and a white shirt, which I thought was funny for a man in the horse business. He sold it to a man who made shoes, and I later had a shop there.

Rodda Saddle Shop occupied the space, and in the 1930-40 period Leo Anderson had a shoe and saddle repair shop.

For many years a tiny apartment was in the rear.

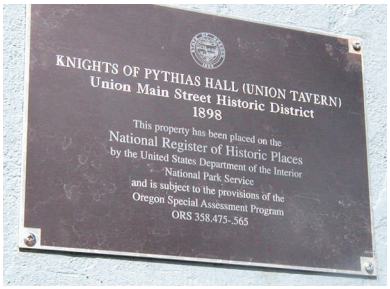


This was a bank at one time, owned by G.I. Hess's father-in-law; the vault is still there. After an addition was put on, the new part became a Chevrolet garage, where I worked for awhile, and the former bank was the office.

In early years, a grocery store was on the first floor and the Knights of Pythias were upstairs. Every Saturday night, before World War II, there was a dance in the KP Hall, as we always called it.

Dances here continued into the 1940s. Also, the city band practiced in the 1930s; Helen Davis (Fitzgerald) played the saxophone, and Eugene Reuter was a band member.

Mrs. Haggerty ran the grocery before 1940; later Mr. Daggett made it a dime store.



Plaque on this building cites it as having been placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Brick building formerly known as Foster, Bridges & Co.'s Block. Left half was a bakery operated by Edith & Ray Coles. Right half was Mike Woodward's saloon in the early 1900s, then, Ferguson's Drug Store, followed by Eugene Reuter's hardware store from the 1930s to the 1960s; in late 20th c. it became a hardware store. The exterior has undergone extensive renovation.

Left half was occupied by Gardner & Davis Jewelry Store in 1900; Webster Variety Store succeeded the bakery (see photo at right), and in the 1930 and 40s it housed a bakery run by Edith & Roy Coles.

To the left of this building was a two-story wooden structure (see photo at right); on the first floor Mrs. Lizzie Phillips and her son, Alta, operated a meat market; her apartment was on the second floor.

When my family and I first came here, we lived in two rooms on the second floor of this building--seven of us--because there were no houses for rent in Union. On the first floor was Al Turner's Saloon. We had all kinds of bootleggers here.

This was known as the Wilson Building. Mr. Scott had a used furniture store in this building during the 1940s. In the 1970s and 80s the Knotty Pine restaurant occupied the space.

This building is offset--out of line with the other buildings on Main Street because of a disagreement. Originally, there was a wooden tinsmith shop at this site and the mud street wasn't as wide as the street is now. Edgar Wilson told me the tinsmith decided he was going to build this building. Nearby building owners asked him to line it up with the other buildings, but he refused, and nobody could force him to comply.

Luce Wright had a drug store in early years; in the 1930s and 40s, George Ferguson was the druggist, followed by his son, Wayne, who continued serving the Union community until the 1990s.

A dentist's office occupied part of the upstairs space in the early 1940s.

I checked books out of the Union Library while I was a kid. We didn't pay much attention then to the name Andrew Carnegie on the sign over the door. It says the library was a gift from him; the Union Women's Club was responsible for arranging that gift. It's called a Carnegie Library, like La Grande's.

Fred Hill negative

Union Main Street just south of Catherine Creek bridge, ca. 1920s; Fuller Paints store in right foreground, next to Baxter's Clothing & Shoes, N.P. Woods Dry Cleaning (same building shown below).

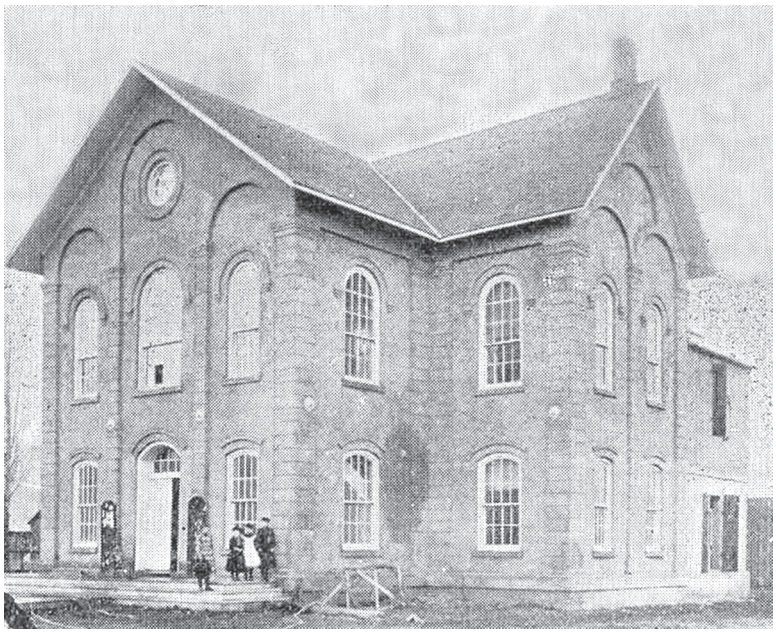
Detail of building above right, with 1898 in arch of window on left.

The building on the left was a clothing store--Frank Conner's "Conner Sells for Less"--for men, women, and children. When I was a little boy, I liked to do art work. A traveling artist worked inside near the window, painting pictures and selling them. I stood there all day, watching him. When he left, he gave me a picture.

The center building was owned by old man Nodine, who did the rock refacing. And the building on the right was the Cock brothers' furniture store and mortuary, later bought by Safeway. Karl Posey bought it next and ran it for thirty years.

The recessed sidewalk is there because the road had to be raised when they built a new bridge (the third one, at extreme right of photo) across the Catherine Creek.

In the 1920s Claude Cadwell had a men's clothing store in the center section, which was followed in the 1930s by a clothing store operated by Bill Baxter. In the 1930s Bateman's clothing and fabric store did business in the store at the left.



La Grande was Union County's first county seat, but an election in 1874 designated that it should be in Union instead. This building was built in 1876 to house the Union County offices and courtroom. After the county seat was moved back to La Grande in 1904, this building was torn down and replaced by the high school building shown below.

Union High School, 2005

This church, made mostly of stone blocks, is where members of the Church of Latter Day Saints meet.

And this is the Methodist Church that replaced the small, wooden one to the south. This one is where I went to Sunday School.

I needed a job in the wintertime, and the woman who ran the hotel told me if I'd night clerk there, she'd pay me $10 a month. That's what I did for six months or so--7:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. I had to sit on a stool pretty near all night, behind the desk. There was quite a bit of business because this was the main highway. A lot of salesmen stayed here. There was a beautiful dining room with white linen and silverware, the three waitresses lived in the hotel and dressed just so. When we were living at the fish hatchery, lightning hit one corner of it; they fixed that.

The hotel was completed in 1921. Beryl Hutchinson managed the hotel in the 1930s, after she was widowed; she placed a pool table in the parlor (left side, first floor) and welcomed teenagers to use it. About 1944 a tap dancing teacher gave lessons in the parlor, and during that period many teachers lived in the hotel.

Photo by Jason Lynch

Renovated Union Hotel in 2003

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