

WILFRED HAMANN

Union County resident for 80 years

AN ORAL HISTORY



Interviews in June & August, 2002
at his home near Island City OR

Interviewers: Dave Osmick & Eugene Smith

UNION COUNTY, OREGON HISTORY PROJECT

Affiliate of the Oregon Historical Society

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(revised from 2003)

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 Interviews and This Edited Version

Two interviews with Wilfred Hamann took place at his ranch a few miles south of Island City. At age 80, Willie is remarkably agile, nominally retired from farming but still active in many aspects of running a large ranch, where grass seed, mint, and grain crops currently dominate.

The first interviewer was Dave Osmick, a volunteer with the Union County, Oregon History Project. He completed a one-hour interview on June 29, 2002. Eugene Smith was the second interviewer on August 19, 2002.

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.

WH designates Wilfred Hamann's words, *I* the interviewer's.

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Born in Union County

- I: Please state your name and when and where were you born.
- WH: Wilfred Hamann, better known as Willie Hamann. Born in 1923. Outside of about three years in the service, I have lived here all my life. I don't put me as a newcomer!
- I: Was your father a farmer?
- WH: Yes, my dad was farming, but in 1928 it wasn't very well doing it by land contract. He had an auction sale in '28 and sold all his horse equipment. The guy who bought it took bankruptcy in 1930 or '31 and turned the place back to us.

Early Years in Island City

- WH: In the meantime, we moved into Island City [a few miles from the Hamann farm] and built a house there; one reason Dad moved into Island City was that you could have a cow, chickens, and a garden. At that time Island City had a population of about sixty-eight people. I lived there from the time I was six years old until I got out of the service in 1945. We built out here and moved out in 1964.
- I: Tell about living in Island City.
- WH: There in Island City during the Depression, there wasn't anybody on relief; the WPA [Works Progress Administration] didn't start until quite a bit later. When our old cow would go dry, we'd trade milk to the neighbors.

We all had a garden. Of the grandkids I was one of the younger ones, so I got a lot of hand-me-down clothes. All except shoes. Of course, we'd go barefooted all summer. Never anybody in town never went hungry; everybody got along well and survived because everybody was in the same boat. Nobody had any more money than anybody else.

We owned a feed store in Island City for years. During the Depression we decided we'd get a little more for our grain by sending it out for feed and seed. At that time, every little farm had a few chickens and a cow and worked at the sawmill or on the railroad. We ran a little old feed chopper. In the '30s we got a dollar a ton chopping grain. We had a little gas motor on it, and it cost about twenty-two cents to run a ton of grain. At the end of the day that dollar a ton was more clear money than we could get on anything else.

We finally had a pickup there: every third day we'd go to May Park and



First grade class at Island City School,
ca. 1929

(Willie sitting on teacher's right leg)

Photo courtesy of Willie Hamann

the next day to Fruitdale and then up to Old Town in La Grande, delivering chicken feed in the alleys. Both Safe-way stores took five or ten sacks once or twice a month. They'd sell that out. By the time the Second World War rolled around, nobody fed chickens and cows.

Union County Flouring Mills

I: What do you know about the flouring mills in Union County?

WH: The one in Island City was active until shortly after the Second World War. They pulled the flour machinery out and made a feed mill out of it. It used to run with water power most of the time. There was a wooden water pipe about four feet in diameter that went under the highway. It ran a Pelton wheel. [The Pelton wheel was named after the early 20th century American engineer, Lester Pelton; it is a water-wheel turbine operated by jets of water for the purpose of supplying power.] Of course, in the summertime they'd run out of water and have to go electricity. The water went on down the tailrace.



Hamann Feed and Seed Store
in Island City, 1930s
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

I: Then back in the river?

WH: Back in the river. That was cheap power. When they made flour, they'd run seven days a week. Supposedly, they made pretty good flour. They ran that mill until the first of June and then shut down for about a month to clean it up and overhaul. They sent the rollers to Portland to get them regrooved.

At one time in Union County, we had several flour mills: in Union, La Grande, Imbler, and Cove. Island City's was the last one. The Kiddles owned that eventually. In the '30s, when I was a little kid, they got a big contract for flour to go to China, so they started up the La Grande mill [formerly located on Willow Street and now marked by a stone monument]. It made a poor grade of flour. We kids helped the millwright by using a rubber hammer to beat on the elevators and knock the mice out; we also cleaned it up before he went to making flour. That middle '30s was probably the last time it ran before the building burned. The one in Union ran a little later than that. Even Cove had a flour mill. I don't know why people quit. Now, the state of Oregon has two flour mills left: one in Pendleton and Albers in Portland.



Grain sacks piled at old Hamann farm
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

In Island City it would take two days to load a railroad car with flour; it all went in a railroad car and was exported from Portland on ships. It went either through the canal to the east coast or to the Hawaiian Islands and the Philippines.

I: What makes a flour good or bad?

WH: It's how the rolls are set up. Also, the first flour wasn't bleached and therefore wasn't very white. They got better sieves.

The State Ditch in the Grande Ronde Valley

I: What can you tell me about the state ditch?

WH: It's about four feet wide and four feet deep, five or seven miles long--from Island City to Imbler--and took out near darn near a hundred miles old river [The Grande Ronde River originally had a serpentine, meandering course through the valley]. I think the state put up \$15,000 to do that. They didn't have a transit [a surveyor's tool], but they used a piece of two by six lumber with a hand level; they'd site and take a mark. They hauled a lot

of gravel out of there with teams--used #2 shovels and hauled maybe two or three loads a day on wagons. It's made of hard pack; late in the fall that stuff is worse than pavement for being hard. I call it alkali, but the bureaucrats call it Crater Lake ash. I've seen some pictures of the state ditch that show each layer of the Crater Lake explosion; evidently ash came to this valley and settled on the water in a white layer.

I: Did they periodically dredge that ditch?

WH: No. They dug it once and that was it. The farmers took out additional ponds on their own to make a drainage district. Each farmer was assessed two bits an acre and was allowed to work so much of it at two and a half or three bucks a day, if he had a team.

Water Sources for Farming

I: The water table in the valley used to be a lot higher, wasn't it?

WH: No. Most of the first domestic wells were drilled a hundred to a hundred fifty feet. Now, for irrigation wells we run out of gravel around two hundred



Ranch buildings at first Hamann farm
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens



Sod house on first Hamann ranch
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

fifty feet and into blue clay. We have our fingers crossed; we haven't run into a water shortage. When we drilled the well on my farm [about six miles from Island City], the geologic survey people came in and drilled an observation well beside it. They rented a pump for a month and put meters on house wells every quarter of a mile where they could. They pumped the stabilizer and got what they call a depression. They figured we could pump wells within a half mile of each other without having any effect on them. Then they ran carbon data on it and figured we were pumping pretty current water.

In Imbler, there are a lot of artesian wells--some of them deep. The deeper you go, the warmer the water. Finley Creek fault there goes into the ground and then comes up. We're on the Grande Ronde fault, though they have never pinpointed it.

Everything south of us, when I was a kid, we called the desert. The bureaucrats said there really should be more wells in that area to lower the water table and leach the salts down--pull the alkali down and improve the ground. And it has worked out that way, definitely.

I: Conley Lake: has that always been pretty much a lake area?

WH: Yes, a seep. We used to have quite a time with swans coming into the field and pulling out new seeded grain. Some of the old ASC [Agricultural Service Committee] maps show that here on standwater, south of me, it

would flood. They called it Peach Lake. It would flood and the water couldn't get away and carp were swimming in it. The old man would sit out there with a net after the water went down, and seine the carp; he brought them home and chopped them up to feed to the pigs. That was a dirty, nasty job. When the river got so high, Peach Lake would fill up and the water couldn't get away.

I: When did irrigation first start to really be big?

WH: Around Island City area, farmers irrigated under 1850/'60 rights with ditch water. Irrigation didn't come farther out in the valley until about 1945 or '46, when we started irrigating peas.

I: With sprinklers or flood irrigation?

WH: We're not level enough for flooding. We started with sprinklers, pumping from river and creek water. Then we got crazy and started drilling wells. Stan Weishaar, and I put in the first wells in this area.

I: How deep?

WH: Two hundred fifty feet, roughly. We're pumping twelve to fifteen hundred gallons a minute from those wells. We have some ground here we don't irrigate because the creek's in the road and we can't get wheel lines and hand lines, so we still summer fallow some. Probably always will. We call them our dry corners; they're starting to burn up already because lack of water. That's summer fallow.

I: Then you put wheat in them every other year?

WH: Yes, though some farmers, like my neighbor, put in a little piece alfalfa.

I: When did circles [sprinkler lines mounted on wheels that move in a large circle across a field] first start making it big here?

WH: Fifteen or twenty years ago the first circles were used in this valley. It's all low volume, low pressure to save water. They've improved the circles quite a bit.

I: Do some of them get to the corners?

WH: Yes, corner catchers. We've got one here that catches all but just a little bit of the corner. You bury a sensing wire so that, when the sprinkler comes around, it pulls the end tower up and cuts the water off; then, as it comes

around, the water goes out to the corner.

Raising and Selling Grass Seed

I: Are you doing grass seed now?

WH: We maintain about two hundred fifty acres of grass and about the same of mint. The rest of it is alfalfa and cereal crops.

I: Bluegrass?

WH: Straight bluegrass. In a normal year at Fourth of July, we're swathing grass. This year it's going to be two weeks or ten days later, I'm guessing. I'm starting to see a little tinge to it now.

I: Is it late because of the really cold spring?

WH: Yes. My old pappy used to tell me that he never looked at the calendar. When



300,000 pounds of 2002 Kentucky bluegrass seed temporarily stored on a concrete floor

Photo by Eugene Smith

something was ready to go, it was ready to go. For twenty years we've raised grass and there haven't been many Fourth of Julys when we haven't started swathing. It depends on the type and variety of grass.

WH: [standing near a huge pile of grass seed in a farm building] This is all bluegrass, which is strain of Kentucky blue.

I: When did you harvest it?

WH: We started swathing on the Fourth of July, which is normal. It lay for about two weeks in the field, and then we went in to combine it. It's slow process--about two miles an hour.

I: Why does it stay in the field for two weeks?

WH: It's green, so it has to mature and dry so that it threshes out better. We want to get it while it's tough so the heads don't shatter. We swath it like hay and pick it up with the pick-up combine and bring it in here. We'll start in about Thanksgiving time cleaning it.

I: Is there a stage between the time you bring it to this area and the way it looks now? Do you get some of the straw out of it before you bring it in here?

WH: When it goes through the combine, it'll clean out to eighteen to twenty-five percent.

I: So is this the way it looks when it goes through the combine?

WH: That seed is right from the combine.

I: The combine shoots it up into a truck?

WH: Yes, and we dump it here on the floor. We use a loader and push it up into a neat pile.

I: How many tons of grass do you think you have here?

WH: Three hundred thousand pounds.

I: Is that about average?

WH: A little bit above average. We're a little heavier on acreage, too, this year.

I: Was the yield better this year?

WH: On grass, yes. That's the only thing that was good. Wheat was just moderate. It's too early to tell, but I think it's going to be mediocre. The wheat the quality is good, but the yields are down. It has been especially dry weather this year.

I: Were you irrigated more this year than you had been?



Grass seed being examined for purity--
spread on glass-topped light box
Photo by Eugene Smith

WH: No, we're limited. We still maintain some dry land or summer fallow--crooked fields that we can't get wheel lines in. We have at least three wells, and we pump a little off the river. We have six circles and about a dozen and a half wheel lines--quarter mile wheel lines. That covers, two-thirds of our ground.

I: How long is this seed going to sit here?

WH: We moved out the last clean seed from here just before harvest; it was slow moving this year. It's all contracted for. We clean it, bag it, and run a test on it for purity and germination. As the buyer needed it, we shipped to the Willamette Valley. The company used to be Northrop King, but they were bought out by another firm. They repackage the stuff there for Payless Drug, Wal-Mart, and anybody else that wants seed.

The best of our grass is called sod quality--ninety-eight percent pure and ninety percent or more germination, with no weed or no crop seed. The people that raise sod buy that and pay a little premium for it. They're the big users of grass seed because they use fifteen or twenty pounds to the acre; when we seed a field, we use only five or six pounds. We try to make half of our seed sod quality.

I: How do you sort it out so you get the best quality in a certain place?

WH: First, we field rogue and they furnish us seed stock.

I: You do what?

WH: Field rogue--pull out weeds. We rogue wheat and grass.

WH: The state inspectors comes in for certification; they look at the seeding stock and then again as it's headed out. After we get it sacked off, they send a person in here to sample it and send it to the Oregon State lab for certification.

I: How can you look at seed and decide that it's top quality?

WH: You really depend on your germination and purity test. Old Mother Nature's got a lot to do with that. Look at this sample. This is called a probe, which we use to sample each sack [running the probe into a sack and pulling it out; spreading the seed from the probe on top of a glass box with a light underneath; applying a magnifying glass].

I: [using magnifier] I see each individual kernel.

WH: [showing a bottle containing a sample from previous testing] The variety is Kentucky Blue, Kelly. The letter Z is for Union County; we're #11 warehouse and lots four and five. That was twenty-eight thousand pounds off one of our fields; the purity was 98.86 on that one. Inert matter was 1.18.

I: But how can you tell when it's really premium quality?

WH: Germination tells you.

I: You have to actually germinate the seed?

WH: I'm taking out a little more than maybe I should.

WH: Yes. The inspectors take it and put it in an incubator for twenty-eight days. It will germinate in less time than that, but they give it twenty-eight days. All you have to have for wheat and barley is seven or eight days.

I: A little more of what?

WH: Small seed and light seed.

I: So if it germinates in less time, does that mean it's higher quality?

I: Are you getting a better product that way?

WH: No. It's predominantly germination and purity from the college. If it passes certification, then this blue tag means top end. You really don't know until you get your report back. You can clean out too heavy. I catch the devils every time I set the machine up because I clean a little heavy.

WH: Yes. If some of the seed doesn't have a hull on it or it's just a hull--no germ in it--we call it fluff. They'll buy that for a couple cents a pound and mix it one or two percent for a cheaper seed. When you go to a discount store to get cheaper seed, you need to look for purity and germination rate.

I: When you say you run it *a little heavy*, what does that mean?

I: You call it fluff. What do you call it that? Is it inert matter?

WH: Yes. There are all kind of games to play in this business. If we don't make



Grass seed cleaning machines (vibrating screens of various degrees of fineness)

Photo by Eugene Smith

- grade, they dock us and don't use us as much. And if we're over grade, we don't get anything special. They blend seeds. Rye grass is a quick-growing grass, a little coarser, and cheap; and they put a lot of rye grass in and maybe four or five percent bluegrass. You can get some with clovers, which is all right because clover is a nitrogen builder. Where it comes from, I don't know; it's never in the seed.
- I: At what point in the process each year are these tests being made to determine quality?
- WH: They come in and check our new seedling in the fall; then in the spring, after it's headed out, they check the field. When we get through cleaning, we call them up and they come in and sample the stuff. They don't even let us in. [showing a little plastic coin holder with different kinds of seeds] This display shows some of the different kinds weed seeds: curly dock, wild mustard, and so on. If we find one of these in our grass seed, I can say, "That little black seed, #11, is barnyard grass."
- I: And you're not happy when you see those?
- WH: No. Then we do a little fine adjusting try to get rid of that.
- I: Can we see the cleaning operation?
- WH: Yes. [moving to cleaning machines] Each machine does a little different cleaning.
- WH: We dump the seed in that box. We call this a receiving separator; it's a series of metal screens that takes out the coarser stuff. They are graduated by sizes by sixty-fourths.
- I: These have to be well cleaned or sterilized, don't they?
- WH: Not sterilized; we pull them out and clean out any odd weed seed. Then the seed goes up into a debearder. Any seeds tied into doubles are split. Then the seed goes back into a clipper, which is four-screen machine; it takes out the coarse and the bottom screen takes out the fine. Then it goes back up to a Carter disk that takes cheat-grass out of bluegrass--anything that's longer, like wild oats.
- It comes back into these coffers, which are indentations. One indent rejects the seed and pulls out big stuff. This other one pulls out the really fine stuff. Our finish machine is our gravity deck; we get a separation here with air coming up from underneath and a vibrating surface. The heavy seed works its way uphill. If we get any rocks, like that black clod, it'll work up.
- I: Is it final product coming out here?
- WH: Yes. Then it goes into our sack outfit, where I put it in fifty-pound sacks.
- I: Are machines like these used for other kinds of crops besides grass seed?
- WH: Yes, these are variable machines, also used for wheat and barley and we've cleaned lettuce and spinach, using different sized screens. When we start cleaning a crop, maybe the seed is a little plumper, so we have to go up one

size because we're running too much good seed over the top. It takes a day or two to get everything adjusted and running to suit me.

I: When do you typically run the machines?

WH: From Thanksgiving to after the first of the year. It's a slow process. We only run three or four tons of clean seed a day here. The gal we hire worked eight hours, six days a week in the wintertime. I come over in the morning, start it up, and maybe make an adjustment, too. I don't have to check during the day unless she has some breakdown. If we're in a hurry for a lot, I run another two or three hours at night. This year we might have to run two eight-hour shifts.



Sacking machine filling fifty-pound sacks of grass seed (John Turner holding sack)

Photo by Eugene Smith

I: Do you remember when you installed this machinery?

WH: Fairly recently. The warehouse was built in 1976. It had to be approved by the state; they had to come in and check it all out. My neighbor and I put it together. It took us two years to get the buildings up and stuff installed.

I: What led you to do this?

WH: I just like to be my own boss. They tell me everyday how much a pound it costs to run like Blue Mountain or Barenbrug [other grass-seed producers in Union County]. There's always somebody that gets their grass run first and always somebody last; in a commercial business you can't help it. Several years ago, they tried to ram too much through; they didn't have storage enough. So we decided we were going to raise grass and do our own cleaning. If we have a problem lot, we can slow down a bit. We decided we have better control for our own.

We have some granddaddy contracts with the wholesaler, but most other growers have to get the contracts through either Blue Mountain or Barenbrug. I think in three years we paid for the machinery, but at the time we put this in, it wasn't all that expensive. I'd hate to put one in now.

I: Have you been cleaning grass seed for other grass growers around here?

WH: Years ago, before we were really in grass seed, we cleaned a lot of small stuff--sweet clover and alfalfa. We went into green peas, we lost our pol-

linating bees for alfalfa and clover. We cleaned some grass at first, during what we called the triple-A days [Agricultural Adjustment Act]--crested wheat, for example. So we've cleaned grass, I think, for fifty years, starting with alfalfa and clovers and things like that.

Years ago, we raised spinach and lettuce seed here and cleaned that. I really cleaned up the machines after that, but once in a while one will stick behind an elevator. Lettuce is pretty close to bluegrass size, a little flatter. I picked it up in what we call a second salvage lot and I sold that into Baker at the farm materials store. One of his town gals called up and said, "Hey, Rod, come down here. I got some strange weed coming up every once in a while in my lawn." Rod went over. "Oh, we gotta charge you more. That's bonus crop. That's lettuce."

That's why we stay with one bluegrass; we don't have contaminating. It's hard to clean up between lots.

H. L. Wagner was the first person in the valley to really start growing grass. He was a grass grower from the Willamette Valley, who came in here in the '30s and started raising grass in rows--the granddad of grass in rows. That was all dry land farming. He did a lot of promotion and was a good grass grower. He started his own Wagner plant in Imbler.

In those days we didn't use a combine. We bound it and pulled in a stationary threshing machine to thresh it. It took a lot of crew to bind it and shock it and

pitch it in the threshing machine. I helped Shorty Van Blokland because I just farmed the couple of hundred acres and I'd have time off in July. He ran two binders. His brother-in-law, Bob Spencer, and I ran one, and Fred Leonard ran one. When it came to threshing, we pitched it into the threshing machine. The most I ever made was a dollar an hour. We worked about ten hours. After the harvest, we took it to the seed plant to be cleaned.

It wasn't till the late '40s or early '50s that they decided we could modify a combine, swath it, and then pick it up out of the windrow.

George Royce was another farmer in the valley at Summerville. He was the nicest dang guy. I was just a little punk kid in high school then; he talked us into cleaning because he wanted to do more in grass. He was cleaning alfalfa. So Dad finally bought a machine and set it up in Island City.

I couldn't get that thing to work. H. L. was living in town then, and he stopped by. He always called me Kid. "Oh, Kid, come over here. You make one adjustment at a time, only one, and see what it does. And then you correct from that." About a half hour later, he had that deck covered, and everything was working perfectly. What little I know, he got me started. He'd share a lot of information with anybody. He was promoting grass.

I: Was your dad the forerunner of cleaning products the way you do?

WH: We started as a feed mill during the

- Depression in the '30s. The least he ever brought back was \$28. He'd go sell a hundred bushels for twenty-eight cents a bushel; we'd see how long that would last. Then he'd go sell another hundred bushels at maybe twenty-nine or thirty cents each. So we started an old warehouse there and started selling chopped feed grain for \$1.00 a ton. They'd come in with five sacks in the pickup or two sacks in the back of the car and run through the chopper and take it back home, ground for the hogs to eat. That made us more clear money than anything else, really. Then we got into cleaning a little seed.
- I: [looking into distance toward Cove] I see clouds of smoke coming up over here. What can you tell me about that?
- WH: That's a grass field being burned. The idea is that we have to shock that grass to make it go dormant. We burn it to kill insects and diseases, and then we pour on the water with fertilizer. The new shoots this fall are our seed head for following year.
- We're waiting for the south wind to burn our field. Where we baled it off, we've got to go in and propane burn it and singe it. We get a little smoke, but the main thing is we have to keep it on the ground. Somebody flies every day at different areas and take temperatures; people in an office in Pendleton formulate whether we have good smoke dispersal or not.
- I: Does a propane burn reduce smoke?
- WH: Very definitely.
- I: How do you operate propane burners? Do you go around by hand or is it on a truck?
- WH: We pull it by tractor--about a forty-foot width. The burners are underneath hoods, and that gets tremendous heat.
- I: Would there be maybe half as much smoke as we see out there now?
- WH: Probably less than that. But you have to have enough breeze. If it's too quiet, you must propane everything. Here's a field you can see where we ran test strips: some burnt, some not burnt, and some burnt heavily. We hired an agronomist. We harvest them separately so we can tell how each worked. We get more yield off a medium burn than we do a no burn, but we need three or four years of data; this is our second year.
- We hire our agronomist to monitor our fields by the acre; he monitors all our grass and mint for mites, cutworms, and diseases. He takes soil samples for us, and we fertilize according to soil sample--whatever we need, nitrogen, phosphate, or a combination. About every three or four years we use a little zinc.
- I: When do you put the fertilizer on?
- WH: On grass you can either do it all in the fall put half on in the fall and half on in the spring. For mint we put one on the fall and two more on in spring. Mint loves water; it loves fertilizer; and it loves Mexicans!
- I: Tell me again about the Mexicans who

come and do the hoeing for you. What exactly do they do and how long does it take them?

WH: They work by the hour; how many hours depends on the amount of weeds. They've been coming here long enough now that we just get them in the pickup, start in the hay field, get that done, and so onto the other fields.

I: Do they use a plain old long-handled hoe?

WH: Long-handled hoe. They wear out a hoe in a year, believe it or not.

I: Why do you have to get the weeds out that way?

WH: Because some of our chemicals don't take care of everything.

I: Would any kind of mechanical weeder break the plants?

WH: Yes. You've either got to use chemicals or hand hoe. Some of our weeds are broadleaves, we can take out with chemicals, but certain weeds aren't affected, and the chemicals kill the grass instead. Cheat grass is probably the worst of any of it. Once you get it clean, the next year you can go through pretty fast.

I: Does your mint crop need just one weeding session a year?

WH: We spray that thing two or three times, starting with Cimbar; then we go into a broadleaf killer, and probably give two or three shots of fertilizer in the growing season.

I: To handle these chemicals, you have to be certified, don't you?

WH: Oh, more red tape through that! For the state, you have to record what you're using, temperature, and wind velocity. Don't ask me all! I'm glad I quit farming. You have to have it on record, but you don't have to turn it in or anything yet, but you're going to have to.

Harvesting and Processing Mint

I: [standing with Willie next to mint field] Tell me exactly how you determine when the mint is ready to harvest.

WH: See those flowers on them? That's what we call bloom. You get out here a little ways and it has only four or five percent bloom. That's because we were a little short here on water.

I: What percentage of bloom do you look for before you harvest?

WH: Fifteen to twenty percent, more or less. We try to coordinate it and keep our still going.

I: What would happen to the mint if you were late in harvesting it?

WH: If we're too late, it gets too dry and some of the oil will go back down into the root system. We lose some oil. We had frost the day before yesterday, so it kind of wilted. Whether that's going to cut down our yield a little we don't know yet.

As soon as we can get the mint har-

vested, we'll probably spray it again and then get water to it to get some growth started.

I: How does it like snow?

WH: The roots will smell really good.

I: But do you have little shoots coming up by the time snow comes?

WH: Not too many.

I: Would a very large amount of snow or a long freeze damage the roots?

WH: It can. We've been lucky here with what we call snow mold; it doesn't hurt the mint.

I: What's snow mold?

WH: We predominantly get that on grain. It cuts off oxygen, and then the plant starts dying. It looks like mold: a green plant that's turned white. This year there has been a lot in Baker County, especially in the Muddy Creek area.

We had a hail storm here a couple years ago that knocked the plants down, but we went ahead and fertilized again and watered it more and it came back. It didn't make the big crop, but we still got a crop off of it.

I: So when that happens, your crop is lost?

WH: The crop is lost. We reseed. In the fall the only bad thing on lighter ground is wind; then you get soil erosion. It can blow clear down to the level that you seeded. That's why some seed is not put in till spring. But we've found that we can hardly dig roots in the heavier ground; we need that lighter, sandy, ashier ground to grow roots on because it digs easier and cleans up.

I: Do you use your own roots for seed?

WH: Very seldom. We usually buy roots.

Just as soon as we get the wagon full, we start. We try to start one every fifteen or twenty minutes so that we can get it the operation in rotation. It takes about two hours to run steam through one load.

I: Explain the steam process.

WH: At the still, we attach hoses to pipes in the floor of the tub and run steam through. It comes out of little holes in these pipes, comes percolating up through the mint, and goes out the screens at the top of the tub.

I: What exactly is happening to the mint in that process?

WH: It's mixed up with the hot steam and goes through condensers that are full of cold water; that cools it down and it becomes a liquid. Then it comes down into receiving cans, just like a cream separator. The oil is lighter than water, so oil comes to the top and the water goes out the bottom. It takes a little variation there till we get enough oil. Every time we run a tub, we drain it off. We get roughly one hundred to a hundred twenty pounds of oil per acre.

continued on p. 19

Hamann's Mint Business: from Field to Finished Product

Photos by Eugene Smith



Mint in field, ready for harvest



Mint swather--machine that cuts mint plants and puts them in windrows



Mint in windrows after swathing



Tubs, or trailers, especially designed for bringing
mint from field to still



Steam ejected from pipes in floor of tub passes through mint;
mint oil passes through pipe at top to still



Steam generator inside building containing distilling apparatus



Distilling vats



Distilled mint oil passing into another container

8-19-02 Monday

Shift	Tub*	Time	Notes
1	2	5:15	Along with
2	13	5:30	Blowdown
3	9	5:40	SL 5761
4	7	5:50	
5	6	6:10	
6	15	6:25	
7	10	6:45	
1	14	7:20	
2	4	7:40	JGL 672
3	3	8:00	
4	5	8:15	
5	1	8:45	
6	2	9:05	
7/4	12	9:40	L 16362
1	13	10:05	
2	11	10:20	
3	15	10:40	
4	10	11:00	L 23325
5	9	12:20	Blowdown
6	6	12:35	
7/21	8	12:50	
	5		

Handwritten time sheet for recording stages of distilling process



Distilled mint oil in shipping container

I: When the steam goes through, the temperature of the oil and water mixture is quite high. What temperature do you want in the separators?

WH: We keep that down to about a hundred twenty--on the cool side.

I: Why does it have to be that hot?

WH: It just separates a little better, like oil. In the cold morning, it's pretty thick and heavy, and in the afternoon it thins down. So we keep it pretty liquid.

I: Does the water evaporate or do you drain it off somewhere?

WH: We drain the distilled water off and use it for irrigation; we used to use that in batteries.

I: Wouldn't this be distilled water with a hint of mint?

WH: Yes. With a hint of mint.

I: That might be a good drink. You could bottle that as a side business here.

WH: No, you've got to have some bourbon to go with your mint fuel.

I: When the mint oil rises to the surface in that container--about a foot across--where does it go?

WH: Into plastic containers or barrels that are covered with metal to protect them.

I: What else do you do to the mint after it comes out of that cream-separator arrangement and into these plastic barrels?

WH: Then this goes to a Sunnyside, Washington receiving station. There's still a little moisture with it. They'll put a vacuum on it and draw off a little moisture. They run certain tests for quality. Mint oil is just like grain: you can raise poor quality or good quality. It depends on the area you are in. Our quality of oil here is probably as good as any in Oregon and quite a bit better than Idaho oil. They do like our oil, and that gives us a better chance at marketing because some companies want to blend better oil with poorer oil.

I: What makes your oil better?

WH: The climate has a lot to do with it. In Idaho they get a few more pounds of oil than we do because of warmer nights. Madras [Oregon] produces a high quality oil; we're pretty close to Madras. But they have disease and wilt, so they're just about out of the mint business in Madras, and the Willamette Valley is way down on mint oil, too.

I: Does that make the Grande Ronde Valley one of the major oil producers in Oregon, then?

WH: I wouldn't say major, but we're fairly well up there. The Hermiston/Boardman area [Oregon] produces quite a bit of mint, and there's quite a bit in Washington. Mint is grown on the 45th parallel wherever it runs through the whole states. On the other side of the equator, Chile is on the 45th south; they are promoting it there now. And in China they harvest it with a hand cycle and tramp it in the tubs and use

a little old hand-held stoker. So we're competing against worldwide growers. Still, our major buyers are Palmolive, Colgate, and others that use it in flavoring.

I: Does most of it go into toothpaste?

WH: Toothpaste is a lot of it. When we started, Colgate and Palmolive representatives flew into the valley to see our stills.

I: Does some of it go to candy manufacturing?

WH: Yes. Confectioners take a lot of oil for candies. Anything that has a mint flavor.

When the oil leaves here, it is highly concentrated. [showing a small bottle of mint oil] Take that bottle and dip your toothpick in. If you put it in your tea, just put one drop in, not a tablespoonful.

I: It looks so innocent, doesn't it? Do you foresee this operation's going on pretty much the way it is now for the next several years?

WH: I don't predict anything anymore. Things change so fast.

I: Are you rotating part of the mint crop each year?

WH: Yes. We're on an approximately five-year rotation; we take a field out and won't go back to mint for another five or ten years. Instead, we go into a cereal crop like oats or wheat or barley and probably alfalfa for five or six years.

I: Why?

WH: Disease. Also, we can cut back on fertilizer the first year or two on the cereal crops because of carryover from our mint.

I: Tell me about the silage or what's left over after the steaming process.

WH: We call it slug. We put it back on the fields. First we pile it up; then we spread it out so that it will go back into the ground. We've killed all the weed seeds, so there's no danger of getting any weed seed. Besides adding twenty or thirty pounds of nitrogen plus a few other nutrients, it's good organic matter since it's chopped and deteriorates fast. We put it on the poorest ground, trying to improve that soil. It raises the pH. Once in a while, somebody from Cove wants a load for their garden. It holds water well; people use it for bedding plants.

I: Now I have the complete story of mint, right?

WH: There's never a complete story because there's always something to ruin it.

I: Is there any major part of the story you've left out?

WH: Yes, I left something out, and that is you had better talk to your banker. You buy an acre of roots for \$1,000 to \$1,200 and you can lose them all overnight!

Enduring Wind

- I: You mentioned wind a while ago. I see that you have windbreaks here.
- WH: They really make a difference. Cedars are the best wind breakers in the low growing state. But we have a lot of volunteers from the birds that eat the seeds and scatter them here and there; we're getting cedars.

Everybody talks about the wind, but I say that's just a breeze we have here now. Next to the little house that I was born in, just south of here, they broke that field up before I was born. That was the First World War. The wind blew all winter. It was one of those old, square houses, with the kitchen in the back end. My mom covered the windows. She put a cheesecloth on the water bucket when we carried water in from the well. The plates were turned over when we sat down to eat; we quickly turned the plates over, filled them up, and ate because the dirt blew so badly.

Early and Later Farming Experiences

- I: Let's go back to the earlier farming days at your parents' ranch. Did you have cows and pigs?
- WH: Here on the ranch we sold cream to the creamery. Skim milk went to the hogs.
- I: Was there ever much of a hog industry here in the valley?
- WH: When we were little kids, we didn't

go below Pierce Bridge because those old wild hogs would take you; they were mean. During the Depression, a couple of farmers decided to eat some pork. They went up there and crawled through the brush, and one of the hogs put a guy up the tree. They finally shot a hog or two and dressed it out. I guess the meat was so tough and strong they couldn't eat it. The hogs had a little tusk that the kids brought to school.

Some old boys came from Illinois in 1902 and bought four hundred acres and built a house. The old man said, "Give me ten good sows and I'll lift the mortgage on any place." A lot of the grain went into the hogs, and they sold the hogs twice a year.

- I: Where was the creamery?
- WH: In La Grande. Mr. Tyler had Blue Mountain Creamery, and N. K. West had his own creamery for a while. We also shipped quite a bit of cream to the Willamette Valley. Ryan Hart from Imbler picked up cream on the express wagon and took it to the freight depot. Ma had her chickens and we had a cow. At that time, we were pretty good friends with Joel's Grocery in La Grande; he'd call up and say, "For Friday and Saturday we need a few stewing hens and a few fryers," so we always had credit at the grocery store.

In the fall Dad would go to town and sell enough grain to bring back a barrel of flour; that's four sacks of flour. In the fall the Watkins man came, peddling vanilla, horse liniment, salve, and spices. We stocked up on all of

those if we knew it was going to be a hard winter.

I: Do you think winters have changed from forty to fifty years ago?

WH: Oh, no, we had mild winters and we had hard winters. From what my folks told me, this road was graveled only down to Peach Lane. Beyond that, it wasn't graded, and blowing snow filled it and stopped traffic. In those days, if you had a car, you put it up on blocks in the wintertime because you didn't use it. Dad said one winter it kind of opened up and the ground froze. He put air in the tires, let it off the blocks, and drove to town all winter. Otherwise, we took the buggy or sleigh to Island City, where my grandparents lived, borrow their car, and go into La Grande to finish our shopping. Saturday was a big shopping day for farmers, and we'd congregate around the implement dealer and the bank and see our neighbors.

I: Or get a haircut?

WH: Yes, though in Island City, we had a barber for years. My first haircut was two bits; finally, it went thirty-five cents. He'd stay open, especially in the harvest time, to 10:00, 11:00, or even midnight so the harvest crew could get a haircut. Also, the guys that ran the mill stopped there for a shave in the morning--ten cents a shave. They said that old boy had the sharpest razor of anybody.

I got out of high school in 1941 and went into the Army in '42. I was in till

the end of the war and came home in '45.

I: Did you see big changes in agriculture pre- and post-war?

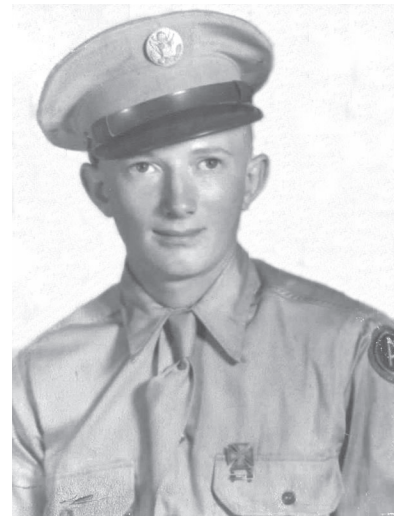
WH: We called the '30s the Dirty '30s. They were dry years, and that's when it really blew. I can remember coming out there on weekends, and Dad would be trying to plow six inches deep and probably do only four to five--plowing up more dry dirt in the spray than he was wet dirt. That one year he took the ranch back, we sold eighteen bushels to the acre of wheat. He'd go down to the mill and sell a hundred bushels of wheat; the least he brought back was \$28. We'd see how long that would last, and then he'd go sell another hundred. We didn't pay taxes in those days; we got bills, but nobody paid. Nobody had any money. It was darn near the '40s before we got caught up on our back taxes.

Dad was on the school board in Island City. The board didn't have any money, so they paid in warrants--IOUs. The mill company and boarding camps picked up those warrants at a discount and waited. When the board got a little money in, they'd call up a certain number of due dates and cash them in; they made pretty good interest.

When I got back from military service, we were still summer fallow, but we bought better equipment. Dad had sold the horse and bought our first tractor--a Twin City, a wheel tractor that was a forerunner to a mini-Moline. It had two speeds: slow and slower. Trac-

tors were geared to the speed a horse could pull. We ran it twenty-three years, until Massey Harris shipped in a bunch of new self-propelled combines that sold for \$3,600. I delivered some wheat at \$2.36 a bushel to pay for that \$3,600 combine. Today, I couldn't get \$2.35 to pay for a \$150,000 combine. See what's happened to buying power. My dad and uncle always figured how many bushels of wheat it took to buy a plow, a combine, or a ranch. We just don't figure that way anymore.

I hope that I have left this farm in a little better shape than when it started.



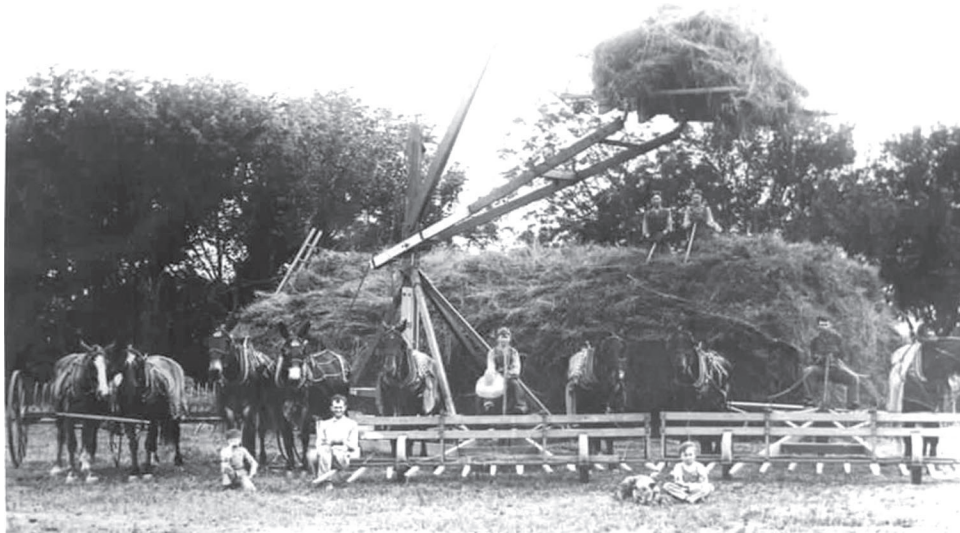
Willie during his period of service in the U. S. Army, early 1940s
Photo courtesy of Willie Hamann



Willie, during military service in France, accepting a challenge from his buddies to ride a young steer
(He stayed on for less than a minute.
Farming provided a similar challenge; he stayed on for a lifetime.)
Photo courtesy of Willie Hamann

Early 20th Century Hay-harvesing Procedures

Photos courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens



Haying with horses and a derrick

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