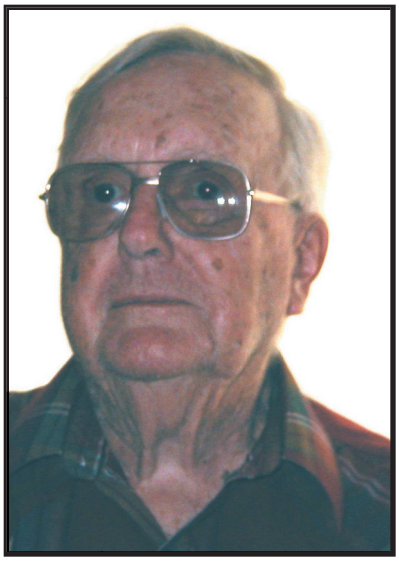
PATRICK FITZGERALD

Union County resident for 84 years

AN ORAL HISTORY



Interviews in June, August, & September 2002
at his home in La Grande OR

Interviewers: John Turner & Eugene Smith

UNION COUNTY, OREGON HISTORY PROJECT
2004
(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

Board of Representatives

Alice Alexander, Cove
Gerda Brownton, La Grande
Dorothy Swart Fleshman, La Grande
John Turner, La Grande
Merle Miller, La Grande & Union
Shirley Peters, Elgin
Jerry Peters, Cove & Union
John VanSchoonhoven, Cove

Eugene Smith, Executive Director
Jennie Tucker, Executive Assistant

Cooperating Faculty, EOU

Robert Davis, English & Cornerstone Program

Contributors

Union County Commissioners' Transient Tax Discretionary Fund Frontier Motors
Meyer Memorial Trust The Observer First Bank Wildhorse Foundation
Charles & Joyce Coate Dennis Cross Florence Davidson Peggy Delaney Betty Drummond
Helen & Pat Fitzgerald George & Dorothy Swart Fleshman Doris Foster Clayton Fox
Camille & William Hawkins Kevin Loveland Thelma & Emery Oliver Marj Parker
Helen & Elmer Perry Anita & Roby Pipes Retired Boise Cascade Employees
Lyle Sanderson Jennie Tucker Bernice & Gary Webster Gerald Young

Currently Active Volunteers

Gerda Brownton Dorothy Swart Fleshman Tom Madden Carol Summer
John Turner Patty Turner Arlene Young

For a list of people whose interviews are available as edited transcripts,
call 541-975-1694
or
write P.O. Box 2841, La Grande OR 97850
or
e-mail unionhistproj@eoni.com

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

Four interviews with Pat Fitzgerald took place in his La Grande residence of 50+ years. At age 84, Pat, who appears to be healthy, mentally and physically, lives with his wife of 63 years, Helen, also a native of Union County.

The first interviewer was John Turner, a volunteer with the Union County, Oregon History Project. He completed a one-hour interview on June 10, 2002. Eugene Smith was the second interviewer on August 5 and 13 and September 10, 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.

PF designates Pat Fitzgerald's words, *I* the interviewer's.

CONTENTS

Born in La Grande from Irish & Scottish Ancestry

I: Please state your name and your date of birth.

PF: James Patrick Fitzgerald. I was born December 23, 1918 in La Grande, Oregon--on the corner of 6th and Penn in a house now occupied by the Potter's Shed, right across the street from Dale Mammen's office [attorney].

I: When did your dad come to the Grande Ronde?

PF: He was born in Port Huron, Michigan, but he was a Canadian. He had dual citizenship. His family came, I think, in 1856 to Ottawa, Canada from Ireland and Scotland. They landed at Ottawa and then they moved to Toronto. This is hard to believe, but he was born in 1863 and was fifty-seven years old when I was born. I must have been the biggest shock anybody ever had.

He met my mother in Lewiston, Idaho, and they got married there. He had a machine shop, foundry, and blacksmith shop in Dayton, Washington. My sister Mary was the first child, born in Dayton in 1902. Clark, my closest brother, was four years older than Mary and was born in La Grande.

Attending Three Kinds of Elementary Schools

I: Where did you go to school?

PF: I started school when I was five years old at the Sacred Heart Academy. It was located on the hill where the old St. Joseph Hospital area is now. I attended there four years.

I: Could you describe what the Sacred Heart Academy looked like?

PF: It was behind the present county buildings on L Avenue. The old Catholic Church, a white building, was there, too--just a typical, early day, simple church.

I: Was the Catholic church called Sacred Heart?

PF: No, it was Our Lady of the Valley.

I: Why did you go to that school?

PF: My mother had joined the Catholic Church. She had always been a member of and was raised in the Christian Church, but all of my father's relatives came here; his sister prevailed on Mom to join the Catholic Church. None of the rest of us were members. Since I was rather young at the time, I was taken into the Catholic Church. My two brothers, a sister, and I went there. They graduated from high school at Sacred Heart Academy; the

Sacred Heart Academy (right) & former Catholic Church of La Grande
1920s & 30s
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

total graduating class of any one year probably was not more than seven to ten.

My father had no connection with the Catholic Church. We were old-time Presbyterians from Scotland and Ireland.

I was taken out of the Catholic school and went to fifth grade at Central School, where La Grande Middle School now is. I went there one year. Then Ackerman School in the college [Eastern Oregon Normal School at that time] opened in 1929.

I: What sort of a building was Sacred Heart Academy?

PF: It was a two-story with a kind of a loft up above--not actually a third floor; that's where the convent was, and the sisters stayed up there. There was also a kind of daylight basement.

I: Approximately how many classrooms were there?

PF: There were eight grades initially. The latter part of 1918-19 and a few years into the early 1920s, there was a high school.

I: Was all the teaching done by nuns?

PF: Yes, there wasn't anybody except the nuns and priests. My recollection is that it was quite a pleasant place. I enjoyed it there, and I thought the world of the sisters.

I: Would you say that discipline was strict?

PF: Yes They were the old-time nuns. I'm going to put it this way: they had rulers and they knew how to use them. The discipline was quite strict. All in all, I have nothing but the best of feelings toward the church or towards the school. They were my dearest friends for my whole life. Of course, most of them are gone now.

I: Were you aware that your parents were paying tuition?

PF: Oh, yes.

I: Do you have any idea what it was?

PF: No, I don't.

I: Did you wear a uniform?

PF: No. The boys, back in those days, had probably one pair of boots for winter and one pair of tennis shoes for summer and either short or long pants--Levi-type. The girls were plainly dressed. There was certainly no competition for who was going to look the sharpest when they got to school.

The girls sat on one side, and the boys sat on the other in the room. The worst thing a boy could do was to have to go over and sit with the girls if he acted up. Of course, the girls never did, so they never got to sit with the boys.

The old Palmer method was used for penmanship. I think every kid always hated those exercises we had to do. Yet I remember that all three of the older Fitzgerald children that graduated from there were excellent penmen.

I did very well in math and the basics. We always laughed at everybody that went to that school; you had your choice: if you were a girl, you learned to play the harp or the violin or the piano and you learned to paint. My sister was a very accomplished china painter. My fondest memory of that building was it always smelled like paint--from the painting studio--that wonderful smell of oil paint.

They had a small room for music. My sister learned to play the harp. My brother Ed went through the exercises, trying to learn to play the piano, but he was a better hunter than a piano player.

I: What did you play?

PF: I played at the piano, but I was like my brother Ed. I didn't have a musical note in my body when it came to learning to play. I love music, but not to the extent of participating in it.

I: Was all this musical instruction given within the school building?

PF: Yes.

I: Taught by the nuns?

PF: Yes.

I: Were individual lessons given during school hours?

PF: No, that was extra. I know my sister Mary painted tons, it seemed to me like, of china, and I'm sure we had to pay for all that.

I: Were there recitals?

PF: Yes, at different times. I remember I had to play for a piano recital at one time. I was ill-prepared and I don't think it went over very well.

I: How many grades did you complete there?

PF: I went through the first four grades. I did fifth grade at Central School, and, when Ackerman Laboratory School opened [at Eastern Oregon Normal School in 1929], I had sixth grade there.

I: When did the Sacred Heart Academy cease operation?

PF: It burned down in the late '20s, very close to 1930. When somebody said the school was on fire, I went up and watched it; there was snow on the ground. I don't know if the fire department even wanted to put it out because it was such an old building and so far gone. If they had wanted to put it out and had the equipment there, they possibly could have. But it was fully engulfed by the time I got up there.

I: Tell me more about the Ackerman School experience.

PF: I guess they bunched all the town's ne'er-do-wells and sent them all to Ackerman School when it opened in 1929! We had quite a bunch of kids from all over the area. The school was run by the college to help train teachers. I went there from the sixth grade through eighth--three years that seemed to me the highlight of my school because of the fine people we were able to meet and be associated

with for a long time, over our whole lives--namely, Elmo Stevenson and his wife, who had just come from San Jose, California to teach here. Elmo and his wifewere outstanding educators, as far as I was concerned. I learned a lot and they surely guided my life in those years that I knew them so well. We kept in contact with them throughout our lives after Elmo left here and became president of Southern Oregon College in Ashland. They have both passed away now, but they affected my life more than anybody that I ever came in contact with as far as education was concerned.

I: Could you be a little more specific about a couple of the experiences you had at Ackerman that you think might be characteristic of that school and your reaction to it?

PF: At the time I was at Central School in summer of 1928, I had a very serious eye problem. Dr. Ralston was a prominent ophthalmologist here; he had gone to Vienna, where at that time all the ophthalmologists had to go to study for a couple of years. My mother and dad had been very upset by my eye condition. They'd taken me to Portland and every place they heard about.

I was very young when I had flu and pneumonia, followed by whooping cough. I lived through them, but as a result one eye crossed; it pulled in. So I was a cross-eyed, Catholic kid with red hair, if you don't think that was a burden to carry! So when Dr. Ralston came back to La Grande, my folks got together with him and he said, "I can straighten his eye, but I can't do anything about the sight." So I had surgery in the summer of 1928; that's a routine operation now, but at that time it was quite a thing. I don't know that it had ever been done in this area of the world. He straightened it out, but I've been blind in this eye ever since.

Now back to what Ackerman has to do with my eye. I thank God every day for Caroline Stevenson, Elmo's wife; she was the dearest, sweetest thing I ever saw. She took over when I had a reading problem related to getting my

Former Central School, La Grande at corner of 4th Street and K Avenue
Photo courtesy of Maxine Cook Collection

First location of Ackerman School at then Eastern Oregon Normal School, 1929
(now Inlow Hall, Administration Building for Eastern Oregon University)
Photo by Eugene Smith, 2003

eyes adjusted. We spent lots of time together at her house or at school.

I: Was she also a teacher?

PF: She taught sixth grade. I grew to love her like no other woman because she was so kind and good to me. Our eye doctor had said to keep one eye bandaged over. I kept it bandaged up, and I was aware of it. But that didn't help; I couldn't see out of it anyway. She read a lot to me and saw to it that I didn't fall behind. She and Elmo steadied me at a very bad time in my life, taking me through a rough period.

I: What about the teaching there? How was it different from the Catholic school?

PF: This is an aside, but when I got to the fifth grade at Central, after being in a cloistered situation for those first four years, I thought I was sitting with barbarians. I had never seen children act like that. I was glad to get out of that situation and to go to more structured schooling at Ackerman. Everything was better organized, with none of the horseplay and noise.

I: There was only one college building in 1929. Describe the setup of grades in that building.

PF: There were three grades in the school; then, as we went to the seventh, they put another grade at the other end of the hall to finally include all eight grades.

We had five children, Mom [wife, Helen] and I, and all of our kids went to Ackerman. We were sold on it. We thought they got a very fine education there. My impression is that Ackerman was far superior to the other schools.

I: Tell me what you remember about the student teachers.

PF: A number of the student teachers we had were just young kids, when I think about them now. That was the first time I'd ever been exposed to a student teacher. I have nothing but good memories of those people.

High School Years-- Starting with a Fire

I: When you finished eighth grade, did you go to La Grande High School?

PF: Yes. I entered high school in 1932. The fall before school started, one of our local volunteer firemen set the place on fire on purpose. I can remember every kid in town going into that burning school and hauling everything off the first floor. We hauled the entire library out of there that night and stacked all the books on Jay Blunt's front porch and in his house. He lived right across from the fire. We were wading in water up to our hips. I guess that was the most exciting part.

I: Where did go for classes while the high school was being rebuilt?

PF: We still lived on the corner of 6th and Penn at that time; I had stepped on a nail in my yard. It went clear through

my foot, came out the top, and got infected. By the time I started going in school, I was on crutches--going from the high school building to the Mormon church and to about where the post office is now, where the old Honan and Holly buildings used to be. We had classes there and at the city building. I think those were the three main places we had to go, but they were all over town.

That was an exciting year as far as going to school was concerned. It was a whole year before we got back into the high school building. By the way, part of the rebuilding included taking the third floor off. We made do with that.

I: The local fireman who set the place on fire on purpose: what's the story there?

PF: He set the fire there and at a lot of other places.

I: Do you mean he was an arsonist as well as a member of the fire department?

PF: He was a member of the fire department and an arsonist. This guy wasn't a regular fireman; he was a volunteer. There were a lot of vacant buildings all over the town, and he got in the habit of setting places on fire. He never set a house on fire with somebody in it. All of a sudden a rash of fires started breaking out. I don't know whether the high school was his last hurrah, but he was arrested for this fire and confessed to it. His excuse was, "I needed the money." It was Depression times.

La Grande High School, ca. 1930s
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

I: How did he get money out of setting the fires?

PF: He got paid by the fire as a volunteer fireman. He was a harmless guy, kind of a Caspar Milquetoast type. He was sent away for maybe a year. After he got out of prison, he worked for Chauncy Walker at the Ford garage as a cleanup man for years and years and never caused any more trouble. When you think about that time--that's not to say it was the right thing to do--but people would do anything for $1.00 or $1.50. I think that was the motivation for it. I don't think he was getting any kick out of the fires--just that buck-and-a-half per trip.

Memorable High School Courses

I: I'd like to hear about the courses you took in high school. Can you recall a teacher who particularly impressed you?

PF: Ken Taylor, who taught civics. It was my first immersion in knowing a little bit about what went on in our town and county. I think two years of civics were required. He was very thorough in acquainting us in Oregon history--a big part of our schooling at that time.

I: What sorts of discussions did you have?

PF: The class was set up in groups that would be assigned pro and con positions on several subjects--a kind of debating, though not formal. He'd say, "OK, you five kids are going to be for this proposal, and you five will be against it. Now prepare your work and we'll argue about it." I liked that.

I: What kind of subjects?

PF: It would be local things. You see, we weren't very worldly in that day. Pendleton and Baker were a long ways off, and ninety-nine percent had never even been to Portland.

I: Would you have talked about candidates for local office?

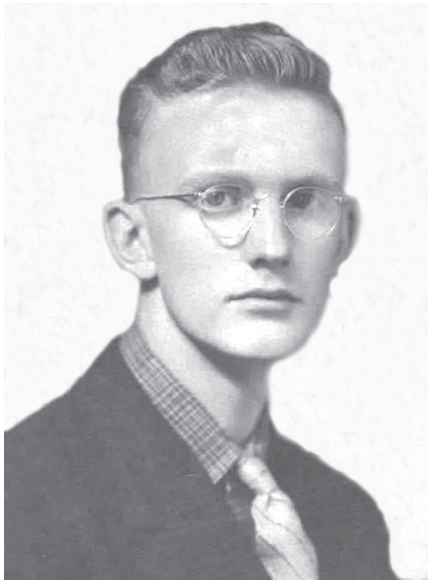
PF: I don't recall. I'm sure they weren't exceedingly heavy subjects.

I: Why did the fact that you had arguments when you were a sophomore in high school stick with you all this time?

PF: I guess maybe that's the Irish in me. I kind of took to that in the early times. I developed quite an interest in what was going on around here and at the state level. When I began to use what I had learned, which was not a lot, I was very aware of what was happening to the country the first time I saw the bonus marchers come through here and camp right there where the Ford garage was. My father-in-law was a World War I vet, and he participated in the arrangements for the people going through to Washington, D. C. I was fully aware of what happened to them after they got there. You know they were fired upon?

I: Yes.

PF: Do you know who the general was? General Douglas MacArthur. By the way, I'm not a Democrat; I was registered Republican and wasn't able to vote back then. But Roosevelt [President Franklin D. Roosevelt, succeeding Hoover] came on as a shining beacon for hope. I had members of my family that were in the banking business later on. They couldn't curse Roosevelt loud enough, and they rubbed at me all the time. I said, "You damn fools haven't learned anything. Maybe you'd rather go back to the broken banks and the whole damn thing and lose all your money." We voted for Roosevelt every time we could. I think there's something about fate that puts the right man at the right time in that



Pat in 1936 at graduation from La Grande High School
Photo courtesy of Patrick Fitzgerald

place. I don't know that I'd vote for him again, under the circumstances.

I think what I got at high school made a lifelong impression on me.

I: Did you also enjoy studying science?

PF: That came directly from Elmo Steven-son. He was a science teacher. Elmo's room was right above our sixth grade classroom [i.e., on second floor of present Inlow Hall]. We spent our spare time up there with him. He had a bird that we loved. This bird, a stellar jay, sat on his finger; that bird was quite an attraction, perched on the desk and other places. We thought that was great.

He loved field trips, even when there were only two kids who could. There used to be a slough across the river from where Wal-Mart sits now. We were always out there digging for all kinds of stuff and taking them back, having the privilege of a college-level teacher running our biology. That stuck with me forever. A lot of where I am right now, looking at that bird [in yard outside his window], comes back to me through impressions.

I have a little book I made up for my grandkids titled "What I want to be, What I like best." It was biology and forestry, which at the time was what I wanted to do. Most of every summer, until I got older, as long as I could, I was out riding horses or out in the mountains.

I: Did biology and chemistry at La Grande High School involve quite a bit of lab work?

PF: It was on the second floor of the old high school building. It had the typical look of a lab. One of our favorite tricks in the wintertime was to roll up carbide, put it in a snowball, and stick it in the cuffs of our pants. As soon as we got in class, we'd get that thing really stinking and roll it under somebody's desk. We had a lot of fun. We learned a lot, too.

Working for His Brother & a Brief Stint in the U. S. Navy

I: When you graduated from high school, what did you do?

PF: My father had passed away in 1935, at the depth of the Depression, and any hope of college was completely out. My mother was older, so I lived with her in various apartments around town. She seemed to like to move every once in a while, so I really didn't have what I'd call a home for quite a while.

Ed had a furniture store on the corner of Adams and Fir; it's called the Rouse Building now. The building was built in 1924, and he started working there for Joe Carr, of Carr's Furniture, in 1928. After Ed ended up being the owner, I went to work for him. The Depression was really hard on everyone, so there was not much chance for that furniture store at the time. But he worked hard and made quite a success out of it.

I worked there till 1942, when he sold

the store, and he and I both joined the Navy. That was the end of the furniture store. I was in the Navy briefly and came out on a disability discharge.

The way the war started out, everything was lost almost. We had no idea what was going to happen in Russia--whether it was going to stop the Nazis there; whether England was going to give up, as it almost did. At the time I went in the Navy, the war was right at our doorstep, and people didn't even know it. The Atlantic coast was on fire, and they still had the lights on in New York City, so the subs could see where to shoot.

Right out from Hampton Roads, we lost eleven warships, and we were damn close to that. The ocean was on fire a lot. Our barracks weren't lit up. One night, shortly after we got there, all the windows got blown out on the sea side. So I was aware that there was a war on, very aware of that buildup.

Pat Fitzgerald
Carpenter's Mate, U.S. Navy;
enlisted Oct. 1, 1942; discharged March, 1943
(reason: blindness in one eye)
Photo courtesy of Patrick Fitzgerald

Working with the Military Cadet Program at Eastern Oregon College

PF: When I came back to town, Ed was gone, so I looked into what was happening at that locked up business. About that time, the cadet program was starting up at the college. Bob Williamson and Bud Olson came to me at the house one day, not too long after I got back, and said, "What are you going to do?" I said I didn't really know, but I was thinking about joining the Merchant Marine in Portland. They put forth this idea about the cadet program that I hadn't heard of before, saying. "It's just now being organized. You could go up and talk to Dr. Maaske [who was the president of the college at that time]. He'd be very interested in talking to you about a position that will be open." I went with them to the office and met him.

It was a lot like school--dealing with guys that had come in from overseas to learn to be pilots. They'd been in every kind of scrape there was, and some of them were doing cadet training because they thought anything would be better than where they'd been. I don't think they knew what the washout rate was going to be. But that was the stance when we went there: getting basic classes to prepare them for a flight school out here at the airport [in La Grande]. They learned the basics of flying there. Of course, they had a

long ways to go to ever make pilot, but when they left here, they had kind of a ground-level idea about flying.

Not everybody could get into the cadet program, but by and large we had some pretty rough characters. They were just kids, but some of them had seen more war than anybody would ever want to see. Others were just coming in for beginning boot camp, I'd call it. They were here, I think, from ninety days to six months, depending on what they needed to learn. It was just a basic kind of course.

The beginning idea was for me to help Roy Skeen, who was in charge of the program and a professor at the college, organize where the classes would be.

We went around and set up the logistics; I helped where I could for about the first month.

I had been an American Red Cross first-aid instructor and used that training in the Navy. So, as soon as the classes started, I taught first-aid classes for the first six or eight months. Then somebody said, "We want you to go over and work with Quinn." Bob Quinn was getting the physical education program going. There was a heavy emphasis on physical fitness because they had to get in shape. Some of them, especially enlisted men, weren't worth a damn. They'd never been to a P. E. class; they'd been getting other kinds of exercise, but not that. So Bob ran a really good physical program for them. I worked for fourteen months with him as kind of his right hand gofer, keeping his books and his classes running. I came into the gymnasium and all that.

.

I: That program ended when?

PF: It ended in the fall of '45, after eighteen months. At least half of those boys said they'd been out fighting. I became very aware that something horrible was going to happen. There wasn't any assurance in the world that we were going to live. That scared the living heck out of me and a lot of other people, of course.

I: What benefit did you get from working with the cadets' program?

PF: I was a carefree kid up to that point, though while I was in the Navy, I'd lost several good friends. When I got into this program at the college, I kept thinking, "I wonder how many of you guys are going to come back." They weren't aware of the danger, or, if they were, they didn't act like it; they seemed to be off on another lark, learning to be flyboys. From the experience of working in the college and being part of that program, I felt we were doing the best we could even if it was teaching a first-aid course--a pretty rigorous first-aid course, though, not just "Put a band-aid on your pinky." We were trying to keep them from getting killed. I think it's when I grew up, put it that way.

Another benefit was knowing Bob Quinn. He was such a showman guy. I mean, he wasn't somebody that was up on a perch someplace. He was right in the middle of everything in personal lives. We both belonged to the Elks

Club, where Bob liked to play pinochle on Wednesday nights. Thursday morning, my phone would ring about six a.m. "Could you take my class this morning? I'm going to be a little late." That meant he played pinochle. It was more than just a teacher out here someplace coaching basketball or football; it was a very personal relationship. He was a big influence on my life for as long as he was here.

Marriage

I: When were you and Helen married?

PF: We got married on September 3, 1939, when I was almost twenty-one. The war broke out in Europe the day we got married. I told her there were two wars started that day; one was going to last a lot longer than the other. We're still fighting each other!

Going into the Florist Business

I: What got you into the flower business?

PF: We'd gotten our notice from the college that the program would be over in 1945. A flower shop really hadn't entered my mind. I had to be thinking about what I was going to do, and I was determined that I wasn't going back to doing what I had been doing before, working in a furniture store for my brother.

Edna Rohan's son was in a Marshall Islands outfit, building airports or whatever it was on Wake Island. He was taken off Wake Island and had been a prisoner of war in Japan during the entire war. She'd never heard a word from him and had kind of given up thinking that she'd ever hear from him again. By 1945, she was a widow lady.

So we put the proposition to her, "Would you consider selling the greenhouse?" That's what I was interested in more than anything else. She said, "I'll sell you the whole thing." So we bought it.

Rohan's flower shop was located on Depot Street; they also had a greenhouse in Old Town. Mrs. Rohan and her husband, as I understand it, started a greenhouse and a flower shop in the '20s. From 1945 to the present we're still in the business.

I don't know what made me get into this gardening and flower business, but I stand by my personal choice. Long years ago somebody gave me a package of flower seeds, when we still lived on 6th Street. My dad and my mother

Pat & Helen Fitzgerald, 1939
Photo courtesy of Patrick Fitzgerald

had no idea of planting anything; they were too busy trying to make a living. Nobody in the family ever had one idea about going around and growing anything. If they wanted something to put out in the yard or at the cemetery, they bought it.

I planted those seeds and didn't have a bit of luck with them, but I guess that's where it started--this growing thing. You can see this from my garden [near the Fitzgeralds' present house]. That's been my number one thing. I've always been growing something.

I: Did the business thrive?

PF: It was awfully tough at first because there wasn't anything available. War took everything, and we were still on rationing. I got together with my brother and others and got advice. My brother-in-law, my sister's husband, was in the bank business--First Interstate. He was kind of wheel in that outfit in the Portland area. We investigated what it would take and found out that a lot of things we thought weren't so. We learned the hard way.

Learning to Operate a Greenhouse--a Little too Late

I: Tell me more about the greenhouse.

PF: It sat on two and a half acres at the corner of Cedar and A Avenue in Old Town. The greenhouse was a block long, with a potting shed and a furnace. It was an old-fashioned greenhouse--no plastic or anything like what they have now--a typical glass greenhouse.

I: The way winters were at that time, could you grow things there all year long?

PF: Yes. That was the reason that house was put up there because it's almost free of wind under the hill. The wind would be roaring over the top, and we'd be down there in perfect quiet. It was well located.

The greenhouse was what I was interested in, but I didn't know--and nobody else did--that the end of greenhouses as we knew them was near. One reason was the cost of coal for heating; it kept going up and up and up. The other thing was jet aircraft, making Columbia, Peru, the Netherlands, and even the Middle East not very far away. All the flowers that had been grown in little greenhouses in every town all of a sudden were pouring from foreign countries into big distribution houses. So that kind of ended that for us.

I: Of course, greenhouses exist now, but mainly, I think, to propagate house plants more than cut flowers.

PF: Right.

I: Was the florist business, or the business that you took over, primarily oriented to selling cut flowers?

PF: Yes, very limited amounts. We laugh about it now. At that time a greenhouse produced snapdragons, carnations, and chrysanthemums. Your carnation crop, if you did it just right, came on right after Christmas. It was good till the weather got hot in the

spring, and then they beaded up. Snapdragons were a pretty good winter and spring crop. And chrysanthemums were strictly a fall crop.

So, if you came into a flower shop, the roses were shipped in, and if you wanted flowers in the fall, it was all chrysanthemums. The carnations were for a comparatively short period of time, say from February till it got hot in the beginning of May.

I: Did you have just red and white carnations, or did you have the green ones, too?

PF: Just basic colors of red and white and deep pink and light pink. We didn't know about all these hybrids. We dyed the green ones.

Anyway, it was pretty restrictive. We grew pot plants and shipped in lilies and poinsettias. There used to be a joke in the flower biz about Paul Peters' specials; Paul Peters was a cute, little Dutchman that had Clackamas Greenhouses [near Portland], which is still going. For his specials on Easter lilies and poinsettias, you had to have a pair of spikes on your boots to climb them because they grew so damn tall.

I: Before the coal became prohibitive in cost and before the jets, did you employ someone to take care of the plants in the greenhouse?

PF: Yes, I always had two or three different people that worked for me. We had a little bunk place in the potting shed so that person could be there at night. In the very cold weather, he'd be there in case anything happened to the heat or the electricity. We always kept wood on hand to stoke the furnace. We had a coal stoker, but we kept a lot of wood there. The power used to go down quite a bit, so we'd feed wood at night. There were some very cold periods.

I: What was the best temperature to try to aim for?

PF: We ran what we called a cold house that was probably fifty-two degrees at night and then, of course, it gradually kicked on and brought the heat up in the morning.

I: When you first had the business, what were you yourself doing?

PF: Trying hard, but I'm not sure what I was doing! I didn't know one end of a greenhouse from the other when I took over, so I basically just kept the thing running. I went to Oregon State College and picked up a few overnight classes, and the state extension service had a lot of stuff at that time. I'd run down there a week or two and come back and try to apply that.

I: Did you deal with the customers directly, or did you have someone else do that?

PF: I didn't have a lot to do with the flower shop. I'd take flowers down. There was one period much later on that I was in the flower shop more.

Selling the Greenhouse & Establishing Fitzgerald's Florists

PF: I had been building up nursery stock on a piece of ground right behind the greenhouse, but I sold that greenhouse property in 1950 to United Builders. They put a cul-de-sac at the end of Cedar Street. The place where the greenhouse was has a semi-circle of houses now. By that time, we had bought this place [Helen & Pat's current residence].

PF: I had nursery stock out in this field [pointing to area back of house]. I'd taken a lot of landscaping courses and got into landscaping.

I: It sounds as though you weren't going broke while you had Rohan's greenhouse and shop.

PF: No, I wasn't going broke, but it was a time I could have used more money. The struggle was in starting out in a business I didn't know a damn thing about.

I: Did you retain the name *Rohan* for a while?

PF: Just for the first couple of years.

I: Then what did you call it?

PF: Fitzgerald's. Our first shop was on Depot Street, where the Kneads Bakery is. We were there not more than one and a half or two years. An old friend of mine--Herman Seaquist--owned that building where the Sommer Hotel was [corner of Washington Avenue and Depot Street].

Business Moves

PF: I moved over where Sydney's is, right behind Red Cross Drug; Charlie Carther owned that building. He had restaurants here for long years, one called the Black Cat Cafe--where the U. S. National Bank is now; another on Fir Street; another on the alley where Marie Josephine's is now; and the place where Sydney's is. Charlie came to me and kept raising the rent.

Herman was talking to me about it; I can still see him sitting on my work bench in the back room, advising me. He said, "You've got to get a bigger, better place." But he didn't have anything empty. Then I moved on him across Adams and east about two blocks.

Herman was mad at me because I'd moved out of his building, so he came in the store one day and said, "I've got a place for you, and I want you to take it." It was right across from J. C. Penney, where Wells Fargo is now. The Golden Rule Store was there--one of the very early buildings of the town. It and the store next to it were empty. It had been empty for a while after the grocery store had ruined the floor.

Old Herman thought I was just a kid, I guess, because he said, "Now, I want you to take that. You get that building fixed up. Just tell them to send the bills to me." I said, "Herman, I don't want a place that big." He said, "Then you rent out part of it."

Philo Staker was in the old Foley Building, which was going to be torn down. He had The Photo Album, and he wanted to move. So he took half of Herman's building, and I took the other half for the flower shop. We got the place rehabilitated inside.

I: Was he a studio photographer?

PF: Yes. I have pictures of his--fine animal pictures. He loved animals and took marvelous pictures.

I: Was he a photographer here for many years?

PF: Yes, probably thirty years. His health gave way, and he finally passed away.

I: Tell me more about the building you rehabilitated.

PF: The building housed a series of different businesses over time. The last I can remember was a big grocery outfit. That's what went under or folded up or quit, and that's when Herman wanted me to get down and get that building fixed up. He pulled a whizzer on me. I got to do all the contracting and work to get the damn building fixed up so I could move into it. He just sat back and grinned at me. He had me whizzered!

I: You did send him the bills?

PF: Oh, yes. He was lifelong friend--he and Snookie. I could roll on forever talking about all these people because they bring back dear, dear memories.

I had a lot of mentors in my lifetime. Since my father passed away in 1935, I've had so many fathers you can't believe it--people that took over and started my raising and did everything in the world for me. It goes right down that main street: start with the Moon boys and old, old friends clear back from nowhere. You don't realize how tight this relationship is with everybody. So my upbringing was pretty well guided.

I: When you moved into the remodeled store, was it a larger space than you'd had before?

PF: Yes.

I: Did that mean your business improved?

PF: Yes, it did. That's what I was trying to do. I had to get out of that little hole-in-the-wall. That first flower shop didn't have a work space any bigger than this whole thing [gestures to small dining area in his home]. So we had to get out of that. Edna just hung on--a widow lady doing what she could do. She was tired and worn out. She worked for us quite a while after we bought the place, so I had her expertise.

We added on the things; I had canary birds and a fish tank. Harley Richardson had always had a fish tank in his art and gift store and he'd quit. People were always asking for fish, so I accommodated. I got a fish tank from Portland, and I had canaries and cockatiels. I had a zoo!

I: What kinds of displays did you have in the store?

PF: Just rudimentary, compared to the way my daughter runs that shop [Julie Fitzgerald Bodfish, manager of Fitzgerald Flowers on Adams Avenue]. We laugh when we talk about it, but it was as good as anything else in those days.

Fire Forces the Decisive Move

PF: I hadn't been in the Sydney's space for too long before Herman got the other building emptied, and that's how I got put to work restoring the building. So it was a gradual progression to better places till the fire hit and poof--everything was gone. It was on Valentine's Day, a Sunday. The bakery in the same building is what set the place off. That building had one big, unfinished

basement with rock walls. The fire traveled under the floor of all the businesses. They didn't think they were going to save the town that day. If the wind had been blowing on the day of the fire, there wouldn't have been anything left on Adams Avenue.

Then we moved over to the Moon building, where the old Steven Van Engle's store was. I called the Moons and had that building rented before the fire was out. Before the day was over that Sunday, I had called Portland and told one of the wholesalers, "Ship me a flower shop, your basic flower shop. I've got a place. It'll be a while before I get open, but I want everything it takes to run a flower shop." We didn't miss a day--even had our phone changed.

Establishing Pat's Alley

PF: We were there for a few years. But the people who bought the building from the Moons would raise my rent every time I'd turn around. They got me really mad one day, and I stormed out the front door. I was going to go up to Powell Graham's drugstore and have a cup of coffee to try and cool off. I looked down the street and saw the old building where we are now--where Roy Farnum had his store, a supply store--and it was empty. Bill Goss had moved them out because he was plan-ning on a small car dealership. Instead of turning right, I turned left and went across to Goss's garage and said, "What the hell are you doing with that building over there?" He gave me a sad story about the whole family being mad. We had a conversation over the hood of a car for about twenty-five or thirty minutes. I told him what I was going to do with the building if he would let me get hold of it. He said OK. So, in forty-five minutes I had a new place--the one where we are now. That's how it came to be Pat's Alley. It's been a good place for us. I think it has been good for the town.

Fitzgerald's Major Competitor

I: Were you the only florist business in town?

PF: There was one other--Cherry's. Mr. Cherry started that business in 1912. He had a laundry before that on Jefferson Avenue. I don't know how he got the idea of getting into the flower business. He had quite a range of greenhouses on the far end of Adams Avenue, where the Farmhouse Restaurant is now. Auggie Sperling, who later bought that property from Cherry, was one of my good friends; he helped me keep going. When he died very suddenly at the greenhouse, his kids came over to our flower shop and said, "Did you know Dad died?" It was that kind of a relationship. I took them up to the hospital. The nurse who was on the floor saw me coming with the kids and shook her head no. He was gone.

I: In a town this small, was it a good thing to have two florist businesses?

Building called Pat's Alley, housing Fitzgerald Flowers and other businesses, 2003
Photo by Eugene Smith

PF: Oh, yes. Edna was not big at all. Cherry's was the biggest florist in town for years. Before the war I always bought my flowers from Cherry's. After A. B. Cherry died, Mrs. Cherry stayed in business for a while and then sold to Auggie when he came here from Portland. They had by far the most birds at the feeder. I'd say they probably had at least two-thirds of the business. With the Depression, there wasn't a lot of demand for flowers. After the war, everything changed--how you got your flowers and what you had to sell. Instead of those three basics that I talked about, we had much wider choice and from lots further away. We don't think anything now about getting chrysanthemums from Israel and carnations from South America. Overseas roses are way overpriced, though, and not as good as those we raise in the United States. It's just about like climbing out of a Model-T Ford into a big SUV.

Changes in La Grande's Business Climate

I: Considering the changes in businesses in La Grande, what is your opinion of what has happened?

PF: I can remember one time telling the bank manager, Arch Parker, when he was here--a young, smart aleck kid--I thought the whole damn place was going to hell. He laughed and said, "Well, it was here before you got here, and it might be here after you leave." There have been a lot of changes--some for the better and some not. My wife and the whole family--a family business the way it is--discuss quite often how to stay in business.

That's a good question these days with all the competition and the way the different businesses operate in La Grande. For instance, going back to the days when my brother and I had the furniture store, everything was on an exclusive basis. We had certain lines that we ordered exclusively; nobody else had them. That was the law of the land until the Fair Trade Act was thrown out; now everybody has everything. When I look at these box stores, as we call them, I don' t particularly care to be in them, but they've got everything on God's green earth to sell to you at a price. It's getting extremely hard for the small businessman to hold on. When I look at the people who were businesses in town twenty-five to fifty years ago, most of them are working for the big boys now.

I: Every neighborhood had a little grocery store.

PF: Oh, yes. My goodness, yes. Nobody wanted to walk more than five minutes to get to a grocery store.

I: When the major railroad operations moved, did you notice a difference in local business?

PF: Yes, that was an awful jolt. The railroad was something special to everybody because the railroad engineer, to most of the kids around La Grande, was the highest, most valued job in the world.

When everything was gone from the railroad yards, it was very difficult. People look at you and shake their heads when you say we used to have six passenger trains going each way a day. That's hard to believe. Now we can't even keep one running.

The railroad and mill people were the backbone of all the businesses in town. There wasn't a lot else here. August Stange's mill and the old Bowman-Hicks, where the fairgrounds is, were two big employers besides the railroad around here. I still have lots of friends

--people in my high school class--who, when they graduated, never thought about where they were going to work; they went right to work at the mill. Or, if your dad was an engineer, you were on the ground floor to be an engineer. It was pretty hard to break into that if you weren't part of that culture. You might start out doing some menial job before you could get ahead, but, if you question anyone who was an engineer in later years, he'd say, "That happened because my dad was an engineer."

I: Or a brakeman?

PF: The way winters over the hill [Blue Mountains] are, I don't blame anybody for not wanting to be a brakeman to walk the top of those trains in snowstorms. It was worth your life to get out of the caboose and get up on top.

I: They don't do that anymore.

PF: No. If you were part of that railroad family, that's the way it was. Their kids all had a job. There's been such a difference in the way everything is done.

Stewart's Cafe

I: Have you heard of John Stewart, a black man who was once a chief cook on the railroad?

PF: Yes, he decided to come to La Grande. I don't know exactly when he came. One of my fond memories that applies to him is from the time when I carried newspapers--*The Oregonian*. When I was a young kid, I went down to the express office and got the papers. John Stewart's cafe was the first stop on my route, which always included something to eat. He became a very good friend.

After both John and my dad passed away, my mother and I lived on 6th Street, and Mrs. Stewart helped Mother get along because her health wasn't too good. She was a dear friend, too. We had a lot of good friends who were black people. I know there were a lot of people in La Grande who didn't feel that way.

As I remember, it was on the corner where the auto parts store is now [Jefferson Avenue and Chestnut Street]--just across from the depot. Considering the Depression times, nobody got rich doing what they were doing, but it was certainly a good place.

I: How did the cafe look on the inside?

PF: I remember tables and chairs. I don't think there was a counter--just an open room. I remember the kitchen was back there. I'm sure there was some way to prepare food so that you weren't looking at a cook stove while you were there. It was kind of a primitive restaurant.

I: Do you think John did all the cooking?

PF: As far as I know. Mrs. Stewart helped him.

I: Did she wait tables?

PF: I'm sure she did. I don't think there were that many people. I don't know that I ever went there as a family group to eat.

I: Did they serve three meals a day?

PF: I know they had lunch and dinner. I'm not sure about breakfast. It seemed to me that they had a good trade.

La Grande's Chinatown

PF: In that area of town in those days, the Chinese were right across from the post office--the present city building--and adjoining the present Max Park. There was a little Chinese place set back in there--a wood-frame building. Around the corner on 4th Street, past the old Safeway building and where Commercial Tire is, that was all Chinese.

On that first block off Adams, there was a two-story building that was some kind of a Chinese club or gathering place. Most of the kids were halfway afraid of the place. A neighbor of mine and I used to get up enough nerve to go down there to that building on the corner of 4th and Adams to get firecrackers; I think they knew what we wanted before we ever got there. We'd run to get out of there and get back to safety on main street.

I: Did anything ever happen to you as a result of mixing with the Chinese?

PF: No. I'm sure they were all nice people, except there was some opium. When they dug up that land where the La Grande Hotel was [at Adams Avenue and 4th Street] to put in the Safeway store, they found opium jars. *The Observer* had write-ups about the opium artifacts in that ground.

Where 4th and Jefferson come together toward the railroad tracks, I think there were some shacky-type buildings just beyond that bigger building--really Chinese looking shacks.

I had a feeling that the Chinese and the blacks never had anything to do with one another.

I: Most of the Chinese didn't speak much English, did they?

PF: Not a lot.

I: That would be one reason.

PF: The Chinese had troubles here. They'd get in what they called Tong Wars. I don't know what a tong was--some kind of club.

My mother and I lived in an apartment house belonging to Mrs. Laughlin, who lived right across the street on 4th, on what is now the parking lot that adjoins the Chamber of Commerce. The Si Perkins' Ford garage was on the corner. I think there were three apartments, two on the first floor and Mrs. Laughlin's upstairs.

She was standing out on the steps of what was then the post office when some Chinese were in a scrap. Somebody fired a shot that hit Mrs. Laughlin in the foot or the leg. That caused quite a bit of furor in La Grande. The Chinese got somewhat of a bad reputation. As I understand it, they rounded all the Chinese up, took them to the train, and told them to get out. That's the only serious racial incident around here I ever knew of.

I: What is your understanding of why the Chinese came here in the first place?

PF: They worked on laying railroad tracks, and there were lots of Chinese miners; they did all sorts of things. When I was a child, the whole area where the new Safeway sits now [Adams Avenue and Willow Street] was a big garden. All the Chinese I knew were little people. Those poor devils would work all day long, mostly on their hands and knees in the garden. I never saw anything except the most primitive Chinese tools. It was all hand work. About four of them farmed that whole big place, and they did a good job.

One of them was funny, old fellow called Friday. He had a little hack with a big horse and a black dog--a Laborador-retriever type--that always followed him, walking behind the wagon. They'd go all around town. He'd come by and people would buy his vegetables. They were very fine vegetables, too.

The reason he got the name Friday, as I understood it, was that his sales pitch was, "You better buy now. I won't be back till Fliday." He covered a lot of area. He was quite a town picture. I was fascinated by that Chinaman and his wagon and horse; the horse looked like something out of cartoon. The black dog I suppose you'd call it. As a young kid, I thought that was the biggest dog I ever saw--always three or four steps behind that wagon--following him every place he went. They lived in almost cardboard shacks on that ground. I don't recall its ever being a regular house. I don't know what the poor devils did to stay alive, but they sure gambled a lot. We had gambling halls on Jefferson and Adams, and those Chinese loved to gamble.

I: They were here year round?

PF: Oh, yes.

La Grande's Klan & Racism

I: What do you remember about the Ku Klux Klan, which was active around here in the 1920s?

PF: I've wondered about that a lot. I think the Ku Klux Klan in La Grande was like another club to belong to. I knew many of the Klan members; everybody knew who they were.

One night, when I was a small child, I was playing on the parking strip by our house. It was dark, and I was the only one there. They appeared within a half block from the Catholic Church. They came out with their white robes and torches, marched up Pennsylvania Avenue, went up on the face of Table Mountain, and burned a cross. That was not unusual then. They did that like the high school kids did the L on the side of Table Mountain. One of them was the person that delivered me into this world. There was a gentleman that lived within a stone's throw of my house. I hardly understood what was going on.

I: You were only four or five years old?

PF: Yes, so I wasn't afraid. I was still carrying flaming torches up and down Pennsylvania Street. I never had a second's worry about it. The funny part was that some of the best friends of men in the Klan were Catholic. They all belonged to the country club. I had no idea that the Klan was necessarily against black people or Catholics.

I: Did you have any reaction at all to the cross? You'd certainly seen a lot of crosses around the Catholic church.

PF: It didn't mean a thing to me one way or the other because I could see those same guys on the street the next day.

I: As you've thought about it as an adult, why do you think they were dressing in white robes and burning crosses?

PF: They were acting like a bunch of damn fools; old men can be damned fools, too. At least in La Grande, Oregon and in the area around here, they were one fly in a big pan of milk. There were lots of other flies like the Neighbors of Woodcraft and the Rebeccas. Some people, I think, belonged to every damn thing that was available.

I: For social reasons and not necessarily because they had strong beliefs?

PF: I think it was just something to do. I don't know what the older Catholics at that time felt. I wasn't impressed by it one way or the other, and I never knew anybody that was.

Now when I look back at what has been said about the Klan in recent years, I'm more aware than I ever had been. I never knew any Catholic that was persecuted by the Klan here. This was, I thought, a pretty liberal town. I went to the houses of kids who lived in the area where the blacks lived, and they came to mine several times.

Here in La Grande, we had one very prominent young man who was a fine athlete. In the '30s when the kids would go on a football trip--say they played in Prineville--the black kid couldn't stay in the motel. I don't remember where they went but someplace where the black kid could stay. There were places around which were anti-black. I never grew up feeling that blacks were any better, worse, or different than us because we all ran around together.

I think there was just one girl in our class when we graduated from high school that was black. She's still a dear friend and has been forever.

I: As far as you were aware, most white people in La Grande didn't have prejudice?

PF: I'm sure they did and I'm sure they still do.

I: But they didn't express it overtly?

PF: I'm sure they did sometimes. There was anti-black and anti-Chinese and anti-Catholic and anti-anything. I don't think things are changed much. We don't have a lot of people coming in from outside. It's kind of a closed black community, but I'm sure that they would say things have happened to them. I'm happy to say it wasn't from me or anybody that I knew. My background is Scotch-Irish. The Irish stereotype is a drunken bricklayer or a drunken potato grower, with the brogue and all that; they still do it in television. That's as much prejudiced as sounding like Amos and Andy. I have no time for it.

Observing Native Americans

I: Do you remember the Indians coming over the hill to collect camas?

PF: Out on Foothill Road, it's still alive with camas, one of the very few places that is. The Indians came to this valley for a long time. In the mid-20s, when I was big enough to be out and around, the Indians would be here--mostly Umatilla and Cayuse tribes. They had teepees.

They dug the roots and made flour out of them, mixing it kind of like pemmican with fat and berries. They cooked the cakes over smoky fires and always had bags of them with them. I can remember camas cakes being given to me. As I remember, they tasted fine.

There are places on Cricket Flat where camas can grow. They said they used to get a lot of it out there, but the place is all dried up now except for a few potholes.

There were a couple of families of Indians around here. I'm sure they had reservation rights, but they lived around here--well-respected people. From time to time there would be groups of Indians that; just like anybody else, they wanted to go someplace else, so they came over here. They used to trade with some of the

merchants around here. It's kind of hard to talk about them because everybody thinks they're always drunk and they weren't.

Do you remember the Conner family--Gilbert and Leah?

I: I've heard the name.

PF: She's a hotshot with the reservation [Umatilla-Cayuse Indian Reservation, east of Pendleton] now. I got such a kick out of Leah. She was supposed to get the Indian kids to school in Wasco. They called her and said, "Leah, what are we going to do? The kids just come and go." She said, "What do you expect? If you can get them to come to school for an hour and they get up and walk out after that, just be glad you had them that long. They'll come back."

The churches got to hollering at her about how the Indians would promise to come to church. She said, "What time do you have church?" "Eleven o'clock, like everyone does." She said, "Not like Indians. If you want, they'll come to church on the mountain at dawn. If you meet them there, they'll be there."

I: They have their own timetable.

PF: I've ridden these mountains with a lot of them over the years. I've written about some of the trips we took with those people. It was really a privilege to know them; they're great people. You've probably heard of Fred Nodine? Fred was looking for pasture for his horses. He went out, I suppose, across from Cricket Flat [north of Elgin], taking the old route over Smith Mountain. He got over there, and it got looking pretty hot because he started meeting bands of Indians. They didn't bother him, but they weren't very friendly. So he turned around and got the hell out of there.

There on the ridge, Chief Joseph put poles up to mark where whites were not supposed to come. When the whites started coming into the Wallowa Valley and making friends, he was trying to get along with them. But the whites got a little much, so Chief Joseph made rock cairns and stuck poles in them. They were all along the ridge across Cricket Flat.

The Indians didn't make any trouble for the people down here that I know of, except for that so-called Battle of the Grande Ronde. I've heard enough different lies about that I don't know what to believe.

One of the Indians I knew was Willie Cowpoo, a pretty good basketball player at the college. We used to get a kick out of going to basketball games and seeing the Indians come in dressed with big, wide hats. They never pushed the crown down, and they had braids sticking out. They got there just before the game started and filed in to the place where they sat. They were with the rest of the crowd, but they all sat in a straight line. They'd watch the game and wouldn't change their expressions all the way through the game--didn't clap, didn't cheer, just sat there. As soon as the game was over, they all got up and filed out.

I: Did they come because one of their own was playing?

PF: Yes, Willie Cowpoo.

Knowing the Carter Family

PF: I also knew Harvey Carter and his wife, Genevieve, who were in education. His father was half-breed Cherokee and Harvey was quarter. The older Mr. Carter, who had been raised in Oklahoma, lived on the north side of La Grande in a little, old garage-type

shack. I thought the world of him and would go to see him; Helen went with me a time or two. He didn't have much there--tar paper nailed on the floor. I had a nice rug at the furniture store I worked for--a trade-in but a pretty good rug. I thought, "I'm going to take that to Mr. Carter." It fitted the room pretty well, and he was quite pleased.

One time he and I rode our horses from Old Town across the valley, up to Moss Springs, and dropped into the Minam. We started our trip from there and were gone a couple of weeks. My mother and Genevieve's mother, with Genevieve and Harvey, drove Harvey's small coupe clear up to the end of the Lostine River. They brought us fresh supplies. I think we were out six weeks all together and rode all over every place.

I knew Harvey and his dad really well.

I: Was Harvey older than you?

PF: Yes, he was probably ten years older--in between me and my brother Ed.

I: Would you describe him the way you remember him?

PF: He had a very Indian look--high cheekbones. He was a hiker and very active in scouting. I met him when I fell into scouting. He was a fantastic swimmer and swam the length of Wallowa Lake back when not many people did. He would be at the Methodist Church campground [at Wallowa Lake in Wallowa County], get up early in the morning, and hike clear to the top of what we called Meadow Mountain; I guess it's Bonneville--the big mountain that's always in the pictures of Wallowa Lake. While he was hiking up the back of that, we'd just be getting up and getting breakfast at the cabin. We were below the foot of that mountain probably three-quarters of a mile. Harvey would come and sit and have breakfast with us. That went on a lot.

Harvey taught me how to swim. I was not a good swimmer in the beginning. He took me down to the lake one time and said, "Now we're going to get your head under water." I must have been eleven or twelve. I had had a bad experience by getting thrown into the swimming pool in the basement of the La Grande Elks Club. It really branded me; I had a terrible time.

Harvey finally said, "We're going down to the lake and you're going to learn to swim. I'm tired of fooling with you." So we went in that ice-cold water, so clear you could see to the bottom and it wasn't dark. He kept me there the better part of the day. I don't think I'd ever have learned to swim if it hadn't been for him. He did that for a lot of people.

We'd always have horses. Mr. Carter, his dad, would have a horse, but he would never ride it, though we always had a horse for him if he had to. Up there in those mountains, he'd get up and fix breakfast. He loved to cook outdoors, and he was an expert cook. After he got breakfast and before the rest of us got the horses packed up and ready to go, he'd take off ahead. He always had two carved sticks that he walked with. My fondest memory of him is when we were at Steamboat Lake, about to go to Long Lake over a quite steep ridge. Mr. Carter walked as far as he could; we'd find him with his two sticks over his shoulder, sitting on a rock. He always carried a little pocket testimony--the Book of John from the New Testament--and he'd be sitting there reading his book of John.

I didn't have much of camera, but I took three or four pictures of him.

Here was the Indian in him: he did not want his picture taken. Nobody knew that I snapped pictures of him, sitting on the rock. When Mr. Carter passed away, Harvey was principal of Central School [in La Grande]. I went to the school one day and said, "Harvey, do you have any pictures of your father?" Harvey said, "Good gosh, no. He would not allow his picture to be taken. We have no family pictures of him." I said, "How about these?" He said, "Where'd you get those?" I said, "One morning, when we left Steamboat Lake and went up to the ridge, I took a couple there and a couple someplace else." Harvey didn't know what to think, though they weren't great pictures. Indians didn't want their picture taken because it steals their soul. He was adamant about that.

Experiences with Other Native Americans

PF: Indians used to come up the Umatilla River on Thomas Road, which climbs up and comes to Ruckle Ridge; it's one of the earliest roads in this area. The Indians used to come up in here for huckleberrying. They all had pickup trucks, with their teepee poles stuck down in the back end of the bed and up over the roof, sticking way out. They had tassels hanging on them. I met quite a few of them.

I: How did the Indians dress at that time?

PF: It depended on what generation it was. The older Indian ladies--like when the Conner family came to church here--dressed with shawls and laced-up, beaded boots.

The older men all looked alike because they always wore a big Stetson, pulled straight down. Sometimes there would be a beaded jacket, sometimes just a coat--a regular store bought coat, probably from Hamley's [a western clothing and saddle store in Pendleton]--and they always wore scarves. I don't recall seeing many of them in cowboy boots or moccasins. I think maybe somebody in the Pendleton area made special shoes for them.

There was kind of a dividing line between the younger Indians and the really older Indians, who rarely left the reservation.

Harley Smith, who had a cabin near the Blue Mountain Crossing at Spring Creek, talked about the Indians' being put on the reservation [near Pendleton]. I don't know what Indians they were or where they came from. He said that, as a child, he was scared to death of those Indians. He said they trailed in a single line over the Oregon Trail and in later years they didn't have anything. Very few of them were even mounted on horses.

This valley had been a gathering place, a neutral ground. They came in from a lot of places. Kamiakan came from a tribe near Tri-Cities; he was a politician, working for himself. That tribe was very poor and hadn't much going for him, so he married the Yakima chief's daughter and over time became the head of the Yakima nation. He had a real hatred for white people and tried to promote a war between the combined nations, Cayuse and Walla Walla. At one point, he came here with the idea of driving the white people out of the whole area.

The Mormon Church made guns at Salt Lake and tried to get the Indian tribes stirred up at a meeting here in this valley. They armed the Indians, who chased all the white people out.

I: How do you know that?

PF: Do you know Alvin Josephy?

I: Yes.

PF: He writes about it. The Nez Perce sent a big group here, and they were all that stopped it. They were big enough and said they had no argument with the white people--at that time. So that valley uprising supposedly died here. The Bannocks were for it and Shoshones and quite a group of Indians were wanting to do this, but the Nez Perce said no.

I: They were going to drive the white settlers out of the whole of eastern Oregon?

PF: The Pacific Northwest. It reminds me that there was plenty of trouble between the Indians. I get kind of upset when I hear the Indians talking about what we did to them; I know what the Indians were doing to each other. There wasn't anybody meaner on God's earth than the Mandan Indians in Montana. I think that, when the white man gave them smallpox, there weren't many unhappy Indians. I don't think anybody wanted to meet them. But there are two sides to a coin.

I: When you said you heard a lot of lies about the Battle of the Grande Ronde, do you think you know what the truth is?

PF: No, though I've heard many accounts of it. For your edification, the big part of the battle took place right out here at this river [points to a spot a few hundred yards from his house]--right here, this very spot.

I: How do you know that?

PF: Because that's where it was fought.

I: What records are there for that?

PF: There's a monument over at Mt. Glen Corner; that monument says this is where the battle was fought. I suppose maybe somebody fought right on that corner; I'm not sure. I don't think they knew where Mt. Glen Road was at that time. How many people were killed and how wild it was depends on who's telling the story. Where the Indians came from I don't know for sure. But the idea behind the battle, as far as the white people were concerned, was to split the Indians. This was called the Place of the Cottonwoods [near his home] at that time, where the Indians sent the women and children.

You hear that they came from Ft. Walla Walla, where the whites were strong. They separated from the main tribe and went right through. If you read the popular version, we won the battle, after killing x numbers of people, chased them off this way and that way in different directions, and took all their supplies. The whites didn't bother the women or children. The noble white man came in and split down the center rung, banged them off in both directions, and chased them all over hell's half acre.

Who knows what really happened? If you had asked the guys that supposedly chased some of them up this direction, they would probably have said, "We got most of them, or all of them, or ten of them, or whatever."

I have about fifty books that tell different stories, depending on who tells them. If you read some of the writing on these people in these so-called early histories of the Grande Ronde Valley--or the whole area for that matter--they barely could write. Most of them probably were lucky to have had a fifth grade education.

I: But that doesn't mean that they weren't intelligent.

PF: I don't mean that. But when you read that, when Captain Bonneville came here and described this entire area as being on fire, what does that mean? I think he was here for about two weeks. Does that mean if I'm sitting here in this house, look out the window, and see fire all around here, I can make the statement that the entire area was on fire? If you had a means of getting in an aircraft and looking over the whole area, you could say, "Yes, this whole area is on fire." Maybe the Indians set fire to it anyway to keep it clean.

The description he wrote was not extensive, but it certainly differs from the writing of a guy out of Burnt River who came here. He thought the land in this valley was the most beautiful place he'd ever seen. Maybe they were ten to twenty years apart, but you don't see references to this place being on fire for the most part except in that account.

I: You said the Indians might have set fire to keep the valley clean. Clean from what?

PF: Ponderosa forests don't burn well if you keep them open. For instance, at the far end of the valley [north] they're gone now, but even in my lifetime, starting where Tamarack Springs is and across the valley to Mt. Harris, that was all Ponderosa forest. There are still some trees on McKenzie Lane and by Dry Creek School. The people who used to live out there said this was all forest--which they promptly cut down and made into farms and houses.

I: What areas are you talking about?

PF: Between here and the top of the mountain, up toward Ukiah, and clear across the Blue Mountains. That's the reason Mt. Emily Lumber Company came here. They were huge trees and a marvelous forest. They cut them all down. If you know anything about forestry, you know what comes up right after that: brush and weed trees--lodge pole pine. When the tussock moth cleaned the trees all out of here a few years back, it was lodge pole pine for the most part. Between here and beyond Meacham [northwest], there wasn't a tree left that was alive.

They've been cutting those damn lodge poles down every fifteen minutes ever since. In some places they're thinning it now and opening it up. I don't know what would be the natural progression of these trees and this land if you just got off of it and said, "OK, let it go." I don't know at what point in time they would die from fire or whatever might cause it. But lodge pole is a weed tree. In the big scheme of things, it didn't exist. You didn't see that much lodge pole. Now it's like hair on a dog's back. We drove through miles and miles and miles of it the other day, and it looks like fur--comes up every place.

I: Do you mean that, when the Indians were here and setting fires, they were burning the underbrush?

PF: Yes, to keep the trees open.

I: They were obviously aware of forest-conservation tactics.

PF: Yes, for their own convenience. When the Oregon Trail came to the valley and got to B Avenue, it stopped dead in its tracks because of the mountains. Nobody went up and down the river; it was full of brush. So what did they do? They went to Fox Hill, over the top, and dropped down into the Five Points Creek country, which is near Hilgard. They cut left on Pelican Creek and went up through a narrow canyon; on top of this part is where Harley Smith grew up. They trailed across, dropped into California Gulch,

and went out by what is now called Blue Mountain Crossing.

I: What evidence is there for the road's going by the route that you just described?

PF: Not anybody that I ever knew. But when the road crossed the valley and hugged the mountain, it first got out of the valley at the corner of Cedar and A Street, where I had my greenhouse and the old courthouse used to sit. There was a stagecoach barn there.

I knew a lady, Ella Russell, that was born in that area. She was still alive after the war and taught at the old White School, which was just about where the high school is now. She called me up one day when they were cleaning out the old stagecoach barn, and she gave me the buggy that she used to drive from her house to the school when she taught. I had my horses up there, and she said, "Would you like to have that buggy?" I said, "I sure would." It was in good shape; I put it in my potting shed and had a lock on the door. I came up there about two or three days later, and somebody had broken the lock off and stolen my buggy. That was in 1945; I think she was there for another maybe ten years. She passed away, the old courthouse is torn down, and there are homes there now.

When you got on B Street, all of a sudden you ran into the side of the mountain. I've read accounts of getting up over Table Mountain. The hospital kind of sits just to the south of Table Mountain base a little bit. They went up there, climbed up on top, and crossed over until they got to Rock Creek. Then they came down the Grande Ronde River to Five Points Creek to Pelican Creek, turned on Pelican Creek, and chiseled a road to get up on the flat. I haven't been up there for a long time because it's all fenced off now. At the Blue Mountain Crossing, the tracks are still there.

Narcissa Whitman's diaries show that the Whitman family apparently came to this place. Mrs. Whitman thought that, if she was ever going to hell, she was already there. They were tired and upset, but they got up where the summit road is now, went over, and dropped down on the Umatilla River. It's the part that comes out of Kamela country. I'm sure there was more than one way that they got over to Walla Walla country.

An Aborted Railroad Plan

PF: At Ruckle Ridge that I was telling you about, there was a place called Bingham Hot Springs, with hot water and a beautiful lodge. The Umatilla winds around a little and goes up toward Tollgate from there. The road that goes from Elgin to Weston is north of the Umatilla River. Ruckle Ridge is where the North Fork of the Umatilla starts down Thomas Road and comes out off to the right of the road that runs to Ukiah. South Fork meets in the bottom of the canyon. That's where the Thomas Road takes off and then came in here.

At one time a railroad was going to come in through the Pondosa country to the Grande Ronde Valley and go across from the general area of Cove. It was to go to Summerville, then turn up where Ruckle Road is now, and come down off Ruckle Ridge. They were going to tunnel through the ridge. I've heard that, if they had tunneled under Ruckle Ridge, it would have come out at the headwaters of the Umatilla River.

If you are flying, you can still see the right of way they never built on, be-

yond surveying and staking it out; they roughed up the ground enough that you can see it in the wheat fields.

It was surprising it got that far. That's the big argument: if that outfit had put the tunnel in, instead of going over the ridge, it would have been downhill clear to Pendleton. For whatever reason, they pulled out and didn't ever finish it.

I: Perhaps because it was terribly expensive?

PF: I don't know that it was terribly expensive compared to the two places that we've got here that are nightmares: the Blue Mountains and Ladd Canyon.

La Grande Iron Works: Pat's Father's Business

I: Your father, Dave Fitzgerald, operated the La Grande Iron Works.

PF: Yes.

I: I imagine that you have pretty vivid images of what that looked like outside and inside.

PF: Yes. The buildings are still there [on Cove Avenue, north of Adams Avenue].

I: What did the old one look like?

PF: I can show you a picture of it--the outside and the inside.

I: What kind of equipment did he have set up inside?

PF: Primitive, very rudimentary. I don't think there was a concrete floor. It was a building placed there to conduct whatever he was doing at that time. I don't ever remember that building as such because it was moved before I was born. By 1918, he had moved over on Cove Avenue; I don't really know how long he was in that place on Elm Street.

I: Would you describe the inside of the new one then--the kinds of equipment there?

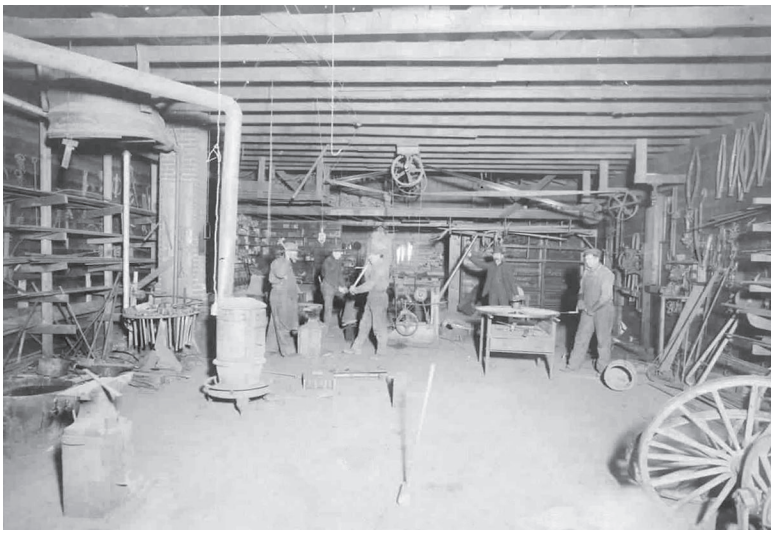
PF: It was a very well-equipped shop, built prior to 1918. He did lots of different kinds of work for different people. One of the old historians of the valley, Earl Van Bloklin, called me one day and wanted to know when those buildings were built. I said I thought 1921 or '22. The reason I was thinking along those lines was that the building burned two different times. Van Bloklin said, "I used to work on a farm just past Island City during the sumertime, and I worked for your dad during the winter. I said to him, "How do you know that?" He said, "You were born in December of 1918." I said, "Yes, that's right. What does that mean to you?" He said, "I was working for your dad in 1918."

I think there were about twenty-five or thirty people working there. If something went haywire on a particular piece of machinery, say, for hay or threshing grain, you didn't go to a parts shop and buy a part. You came to my dad's place and he made the parts. They had quite an extensive casting area, where they used babbitt, bronze, and various kinds of materials to make these parts. I used to stand there and watch them make the parts.

I: Where did he get the patterns?

PF: I don't know where they came from. All I know was that they were in the building. The first time it burned, the patterns were in a big, fireproof safe, so they didn't lose them.

My dad, I think, was the only person



Exterior and interior views of La Grande Iron Works,
corner Washington & Elm, 1903
Note on front of photo: "La Grande Iron Works early 1900. Dave Fitzgerald at his shop right rear of picture [lower]."
Machine at top is a pipe-drawing machine for wells,
run by a steam engine they manufactured.
Photos courtesy of Patrick Fitzgerald

who made parts at that time. He did a lot of work, repairing equipment as big as railroad engines--the engines that were used to bring logs in for the various lumber companies to the mill. For instance, the old camp that is now Camp Elkanah was the Mt. Emily Camp [in Starkey, about 25 miles southwest of La Grande] that belonged to the Stange family. Also, the Bowman-Hicks Lumber Company was where the present fairgrounds are. And there were mills in Union and Elgin.

It was a large building with a concrete floor and everything set up to be convenient to the different types of work. Dad at one time bought a huge machine--I thought it was huge--with big pulleys and wheels that turned on it and that ran off belts. They had a central power system in the building, and everything ran off belts and pulleys all over the building. They used a big drill outfit to cut off pieces of steel rod; it occupied a good-sized area on the east side of the building. They'd shove the rod into one part of the machine, pull it, and the machine would cut the rod off. Now they use entirely different material to do that job. But back then, that was quite a machine. They got a lot of publicity on that fine machine that could cut angle iron and a lot of other things; it did away with torches and saws.


LA GRANDE IRON WORKS
D. FITZGERALD, Proprietor.
Complete Foundry and Machine Shop.
Manufacturers of the Fitzgerald Roller Feed Mill. Repairing and rebuilding of machinery of all kinds. Re-grinding crankshafts, re-grinding and re-boring cylinders. Over-sized pistons furnished on all classes of gas engines.
LA GRANDE OREGON

One of several ads for the Fitzgerald Iron Works that appeared in newspapers like the *Union Republican* in the 1900-1910 period

They also had a couple of forges that could make pieces that they mailed out.

I: Where did he find the trained workers for this kind of work?

PF: Surprisingly enough, there were a lot of fine machinists around. They probably worked for the railroad, or they might have worked for some of the mills. After Dad got everything set up and everything was operating, the mill owners found out it was a lot easier to have him do it than to make one or two pieces themselves. In the name of efficiency, that became the place where almost everything was done.

I: Was he paying fairly high wages to his workers?

PF: Yes, for that time the machinists and the people that did the pattern making were some of the better paid men. They were very well versed in what they were doing. It was amazing to watch them turn out things.

I: Was this a formally organized company with him as the president?

PF: It wasn't incorporated. It was just La Grande Iron Works; Dad was the company. I think Dad carried most of his business in his hip pocket in the early days. Around 1922, after he got back from World War I, my sister's husband graduated in civil engineering. He was a fine bookkeeper and very efficient person--ideal for Dad because, after my brother-in-law came, he reorganized to get everything businesslike and running efficiently. Then it became more of a company, but there were no stock holders. It was just Dad.

I: What other kinds of things did they make at the iron works?

PF: They made brake shoes for the logging trains and bearings. The bearings kept breaking down. You went to Dave Fitzgerald to get them fixed. He had a very extensive pattern-inventory list, so he could make any kind of bearing. He worked mostly in Union and Wallowa counties.

Fitzgerald's Iron Bridges

I: Did he help build railroad bridges in Union County?

PF: Yes, the bridge for the old highway to get out of town. You went down to the corner of Adams and 2nd, crossed the 2nd Street viaduct, went to Y Avenue, turned left, and then crawled around the railroad tracks and crossed the bridge.

He also built one or both of the iron bridges that crossed from Perry. He built a lot of the early bridges around here--those iron things stuck around the valley.

I: Tell me a little more about how that came to be and what these bridges looked like.

PF: The first bridge that Dad was responsible for was at what used to be Orodell. Originally, you went up Fox Hill, drifted across, and dropped back down.

I: I'd like to know what the bridge looked like.

PF: Nowadays you wouldn't think it was wide enough for one car. It had a wooden deck. I suppose there was concrete on both ends for footings to sit it on.

I: Did it have an arch?

PF: Yes. I can see it in my mind. It was probably like fifty other bridges around the valley or any place else in those days.

I: Was there a standard design that bridge builders like him were using?

PF: I think so. They built the thing right there on the spot; it didn't get transported and dropped. It had an arch, a crossing, and crossarms.

I: Was it painted when it was finished?

PF: Yes, black--to match Ford. There was still a lot of stuff transported around the valley with horses and wagons. They didn't die out very easily because there were a lot of wagons and good horses. They used them till they finally got replaced by mechanical things. All over the valley, there were various kinds of bridges, most of which were not metal. They were just a couple of logs that lay across the river, some wood boards hammered on the logs, and that was the bridge.

I: Who was paying for these bridges?

PF: I don't know whether the county built the bridge across the river at Orodell or the state. I know river water had a bad habit of coming up every once in a while and knocking out Dad's bridges. He sweated them out. I don't know that he ever had to replace any, but I remember especially the one at Orodell; he barely got it in, and they had high water. Obviously it didn't wash out, but he was quite relieved when it didn't.

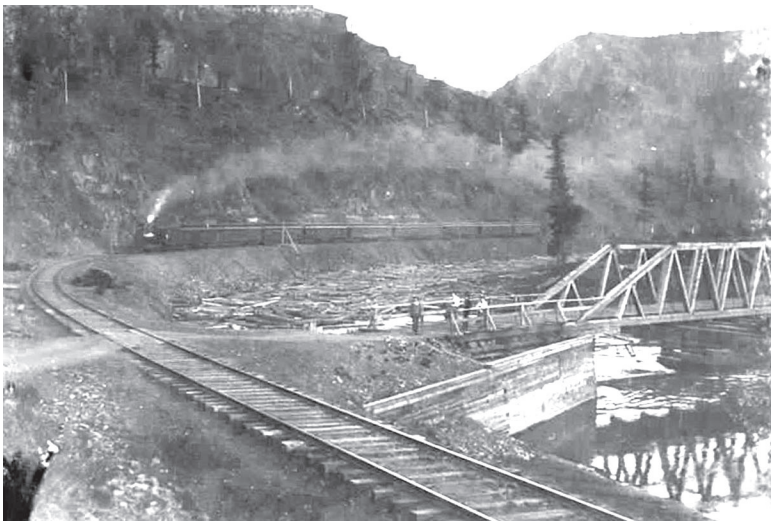
I: Do you think most of those bridges were standing for perhaps twenty-five years?

PF: I don't know when they cut what they call Orodell Boulevard, which is the road that leads out of town now. That bridge was still standing when the freeways came through.

Iron Bridges in Union County Built by Dave Fitzgerald, Pat's Father

Photos courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

Bridge over Grande Ronde River at Orodell



Bridge at Perry

Old Oregon Trail (Highway 30) bridge over Grande Ronde River
& Union Pacific mainline tracks, west of La Grande
(demolished in early 1960s)

I: So up to the early 1960s.

PF: Yes, and that thing was still used. The city dump was on the right-hand side of the bridge where you went across [going northwest]. A high school class was out there digging up artifacts for a project just a while back. That bridge was there for a long time even after the freeways came through. I know that all the different ones that were around the valley stood a lot longer and got used a lot longer than anybody thought they should have.

A Stagecoach Stop

I: Stagecoaches operated before your time, but you knew the Hardings, and they had a stagecoach stop. Where was that?

PF: As you climb the hill after you pass Hilgard [going west on I-84], it's to the right of the freeway. At that point Pelican Creek goes down to Five Points Creek. If you wanted to go to where Harding's stagecoach stop was, you'd get on Pelican Creek and go up a ways. Up on that flat is where Harley Smith was raised. There was a log cabin up there, and I used to go up with him. After my father passed away, he was like a second dad to me. We used to go up there on weekends quite a lot during the summertime.

I: Did you ever see the stagecoach stop?

PF: Yes.

I: What did it look like?

PF: It was a very small building, painted red. It wasn't fallen down or anything, but it was nondescript. Unfortunately, I never paid much attention to it.

I: Do you think it would have been a place where the passengers in the stagecoach could go to the outhouse and maybe get a drink or food?

PF: Yes, I think so. It was that type of thing.

I: It wasn't a place to stay overnight.

PF: No.

I: Do you think stagecoach stops around here typically had a person who was in charge and stayed there?

PF: Yes, the Hardings.

I: They made a business of it?

PF: Yes.

Bowman-Hicks Mill

I: Were you ever inside the Bowman-Hicks Mill on what is now the Union County Fairgrounds?

PF: No, we were a bunch of ornery, little kids. Mostly we got run off the log pond because we ran over logs. That was big-time sport, and that was my connection with the mill.

The Ashby family owned or were in charge of that mill--a pretty good-sized mill. If I recall correctly, the mill shut down during the Depression--probably not because of a log shortage but because of the Depression. Somewhere in that timeframe the Ashbys moved to Wallowa County and had a mill there.

I: Are there any other characteristics of the Bowman-Hicks Mill that you remember?

PF: The water tower. One of the reasons I remember is because Helen's uncle, Tex Knight, bought that old water tower. The tank was wood; it had iron

bands around it, which he unscrewed. He stacked it up on a piece of ground he owned in Union and was always going to put it back up but never did. So it ended its days lying on the ground.

I: Do you think the Bowman-Hicks Mill had its own source of power?

PF: No, I don't think so.

I: Wouldn't they have had a steam boiler?

PF: I don't know. Stange had his own power for a long time.

I: A wood-fired boiler?

PF: I don't think they bought coal to put in it. Bowman-Hicks was a comparatively small mill.

Knowing Spud Helm

I: You were pretty close to Spud Helm, weren't you?

PF: Yes. It still hurts. Dad and I had gone over to Union, while Spud and Captain Noe were looking for some lawbreakers; they had pulled up across the street from where the Texaco station is [west end of Adams Avenue]. Dad and I had come back from Union and stopped where there was a crowd of people. We got out of the car and went over to Andy's service station and saw Spud on a stretcher. He was supposed to have come to dinner at our house that day. He said, "Dave, I guess I won't make it to dinner today." They took him to the hospital. I think he would have lived nowadays because they have more drugs to treat infections.

He was my mentor and a semi-pro baseball player in La Grande. They all played up where the high school was. The brick building that used to be the mechanical drawing classroom still stands there. There was a grandstand that faced toward the mountain [Table Mountain]. Everybody used to go to the baseball games.

Spud was, I think, a second baseman. I had his mitt for years. He gave me a watch and a baseball. I don't know what happened to any of that. When we left, we packed everything up in a big barrel; we didn't want anything done with it and put it in the basement of the furniture store so that, when we got back from the war, it would be there. That and a lot of other stuff disappeared. So I lost my mitt, my ball, and my watch.

I: What was Spud's real name?

PF: Amos.

I: How long had he been a policeman before he died?

PF: They hadn't formed the State Police very long before Spud was killed.

I: He was a State Trooper then?

PF: Yes. I don't know a lot about the formation of the State Police. Before the State Police were formed, everything was in the county.

An Encounter with Hap Dunn

PF: Hap Dunn was a local person born and raised here; he joined the State Police early on and became the captain in charge of the district, which was headquartered in Baker. Spud was also out of Baker at that time. When Hap was a city police officer in the mid-'20s, he had a motorcycle. My dad was a pretty obstinate man. He didn't like his mind changed by him or anybody else. Dad had a habit of leaving the shop on Cove Avenue every day at

the same time. That was his routine. He would get in his Model-T Ford and drive up to what was La Grande National Bank, where Pioneer Bank is now. He'd make a U-turn and park in front of John Allen's cigar store, which was where the coffee shop, Highway 30, is on the corner. Dad smoked cigars. He'd park his car and do his banking; then they'd all get together and see who could tell the biggest lie.

Unbeknownst to anybody, I guess, the city had passed an ordinance prohibiting U-turns on these corners. Hap came over on his motorcycle in his uniform and puttees. When Dad came out to get in his car and go back to work, Hap said, "Dave, you can't do that anymore." "Do what?" He said, "You can't make U-turns there anymore." That ticked Dad pretty good. He proceeded to tell Hap where to get off. "I've been turnin' around there every damn day for …" on and on and on. "And no young whippersnapper is gonna tell me what I can do with my car." He got in the car and drove off and left Hap standing there. It made the papers that time, I think. Hap was getting in trouble.

Horses, Doctors, and the Hot Lake Sanitarium

I: Do you remember the Gregory Stables?

PF: Yes. Dr. Gregory, Dr. Haun, with Bill Allen, who had the drugstore in Wallowa and became business manager and ran the pharmacy at Hot Lake, came to Union County and took over Hot Lake Sanatorium with Dr. Branner and Dr. Ross. They ran that for two years. When Dr. Gregory came here [to La Grande], he had a horse barn and arena where the truck stop is now on Highway 30. Dr. Gregory hired Joe Bob Price from Kansas or Missouri--he was probably one of the top horse trainers in the country--to be in charge of it. He was also a horse judge--as good as they came. But he and Dr. Gregory had some kind of set-to or blow-up about Hot Lake, so Dr. Gregory left there, came to town, and built a clinic building across the street from Methodist Church [on 4th Street]. By that time, whether Dr. Gregory was getting older or whatever the reason, they got rid of the horses.

I don't recall what Joe Bob did around here, though he worked at the Elks Club at one time, and he continued to help people with their horses and to judge at horse shows. He was a real Southern gentleman, the way I remember him--the pleasantest, nicest man I ever knew. He'd forgotten more about horses than I ever knew.

I: To elaborate on the Hot Lake affair, when Dr. Gregory took it over was it on the way down?

PF: No, but it didn't have the reputation that it had when the Phys were there. Mark's dad, Dr. W.T. Phy, had a huge dairy herd and chickens. There was a two- or three-story building to raise chickens; that was gone, along with the dairy farm. But there was still a lot of medicine going on there, and they had a nice restaurant and a beautiful tile floor in the main part of the building. They had it built up to quite a good, big operation.

I: Was it the Depression that did it in?

PF: No, I don't think so. I never did know what happened at Hot Lake, but all of a sudden the doctors involved there quit. That's when it started down. I can't verify any of this. Mrs. Phy, not W. T.'s wife, got hold of it, and that's when owners changed about every year or two.

Dr. Roth, not a medical doctor, took over then and started a nursing home. He was kind of a flighty guy; we always used to say screwy. But he was a good operator as far as that nursing home was concerned. He ran it in the late '40s to the early '50s, and everybody said he did a pretty good job. All of a sudden he was gone.

Everybody who got a hold of it got burned. Hot Lake has been a Jonah for anybody connected with it. They tried all kinds of ideas to make money. Somebody asked me one time if I would like to put some money in Hot Lake, and I said, "Yes, I sure as hell would. I've got a penny, and I want to drive by Hot Lake and throw it in." That's as much money as I'd put in Hot Lake. Everybody, including some very prominent people, that stuck their money in that place lost it. Down, down, down. One of my most brilliant ideas was that they should have found out if the bomb at Los Alamos worked or not, and then, they should have brought it here and put it in the bottom of Hot Lake and set that first atom bomb off. We'd have cleaned that mess up, deepened the lake, and it would all be gone.

Hot Lake has had more fly-by-nighters and crooks that got money for this and that and then took off.

I: It has a kind of mysterious glamour, I think, for many people, and they get the idea that it would be romantic and wonderful to somehow turn it into an attractive money-making place.

PF: I had the best idea: clean up the land.

I: Is there any other aspect of your experience here in Union County that you want to talk about?

PF: I've known so damn many of these people. It's best to let sleeping dogs lie.

Hot Lake Sanitorium in early 20th century,
with boardwalks extending from the entrance to the train depot
Photo courtesy of Fred Hill

Index

D

E

F

G

H

N

O

P

R

S

T

U

V

W

Y