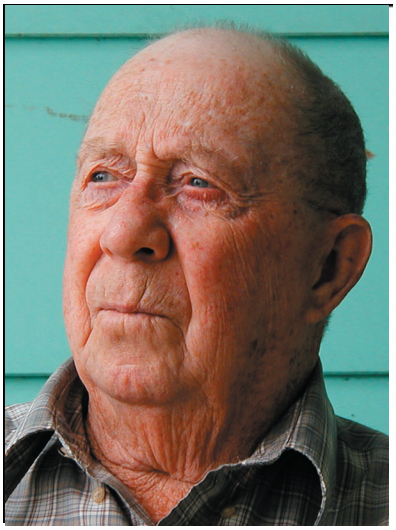
WILLIAM TALBOTT

Union County resident for 79 years

AN ORAL HISTORY



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

Interviewer: John Turner

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

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Preface

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

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

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

About the Interview and This Edited Version

The two interviews with William Talbott took place in the living room of his La Grande home. He is physically active at age eighty-seven, despite occcasional aches and pains, and mentally alert. John Turner was the interviewer on May 7 and June 23, 2002.

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

- reorganization of content

- deletion of some extraneous comments

- omission of false sentence starts and other normal speech fillers that detract from readability

- normalization of pronunciation and grammar in conformity with standards of written English.

WT designates William Talbott's words, I the interviewer's.

CONTENTS

Coming to La Grande from Kansas

I: Where were you born, Bill?

WT: In Dodge City, Kansas. 1915.

I: When did you leave Kansas?

WT: We came out from Kansas in August of 1923--my mother and father and five brothers and sisters, in a Model T Ford.

I: Where were you going when you came?

WT: My dad was headed for Roseburg. But, when he hit La Grande, he was broke and that's where we ended up.

The first place I lived here in La Grande was a big, two-story house where the college coliseum now is [on present Eastern Oregon University campus]. We got here the last day of August, and I had to go to school about two days later.

I: What school did you go to?

WT: Central School. Some of my teachers' names were Nell Mahaffey, Mrs. Gower, Mrs. Snider. They were in grade school.

I: What grade were you in, Bill, when you first went to Central?

WT: Third. I think the teacher's name was Mrs. McNees when I was in the third grade. I went through Central School and then into high school, but I didn't finish high school.

I: How was it when you came from Dodge City to La Grande? Did you feel comfortable?

WT: It was quite a change because of the mountains. I'd never seen a mountain till we got to the Rocky Mountains. We came out of Kansas into Colorado, and then we saw the Rocky Mountains. I thought there was no way we were going to go over the top of those mountains, but we did, and we came up through Wyoming and then into La Grande. But the difference here was the mountains. We didn't have any in Kansas, you know. It was just all flat back in the prairies.

I: Did your dad go right to work as an electrician?

Bill Talbott at age 3
Photo courtesy of Bill Talbott

Central School, ca. 1917
(old La Grande High School on right)
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

WT: Yes, he went right to work the second day he was here for an electric shop that was located right across the street from where M.J. Goss's is now. The fellow who had that shop was named Harry Williams. Dad worked for him for a few years, and then dad bought him out. Then the Depression came along, and that put the end to everything.

I: A lot of people suffered during that time.

WT: Yes. We later lived on Cedar Street--Cedar and K--and Nell Mahaffey, a teacher, lived in a house behind us, in the center of the field out there--where Sunset Drive is now. She had a niece that lived with her--June Deal--and she used to come by and holler at me to get ready to get to school. I didn't like that. The teacher lived too close to me. She put me on her lap one day--I was messing around doing something --and said, "I've got to dust your britches for you."

I: Then you did the normal things kids do growing up?

WT: Got into all kinds of problems and troubles. Friends of mine--Mary's [Bill's wife] stepdad--lived where Hoke Hall is [on EOU campus]. I ran around with her stepbrothers. We used to go downtown to the show, and we had to go down the steps that went over the hill by the Science Building [on western edge of EOU campus]--down from L Avenue to N. There was no 8th Street--just a big gravel pit --so we couldn't go down through there usually. It was too hard to get through, so we'd always go down these steps. There were two sections. One went up about half way; there was kind of a deck; and then they went on up.

Some loggers had come in from Starkey, and they went over to Mary's stepdad's. He made a lot of whiskey and wine, and they stayed there on the weekends. We kids would always beg them to give us money to go to the show. They'd always dish us out some dimes and nickels; then we'd go to the show.

Experiences with Ku Klux Klan Members

WT: They also had a couple of cows, and we had to peddle the milk. Some people lived down on Madison Avenue [on north side of railroad tracks] that we had to take the milk to. Mary's mother sold milk to them, so in the evenings we'd take the milk down there, and then we'd slip off to the show at the old Star Theater.

One time, as we came home--we were all half scared of the dark and we must have been to a pretty scary movie, like *Frankenstein* or something--we were watching the steps as we came up 7th Street, and we started up those steps. We got almost to the top, looked up, and here were two or three guys in white robes, with white hoods, sitting on the top step. You talk about cleaning the house! We were out of there in a hurry. They were Ku Klux Klan guys. I never knew much about the Ku Klux Klan. In those days, I didn't think anything of it. We didn't pay attention.

We just thought they were some guys going around with robes on.

They used to burn a cross at night on the face of Table Mountain [at western edge of La Grande] every once in awhile--maybe once a month. And so we kids, being curious as we always are--all kids are--sneaked up Deal Canyon [adjacent to Table Mountain] one night when they had a cross-burning up there. We came around the back of Table Mountain, up on top, where we could see down where they were. There were five or six guys. I don't know whether they were having a meeting or what they were doing, but they were there with this cross they were burning. We watched them for awhile. We didn't know what was going on.

Finally, one of the kids got wild and rolled a rock down there. That put the stop to that. They came a-roaring up out of there, and we kids took off down Deal Canyon.

That's about all I ever had to do with the Ku Klux Klan, but I do know they had a chapter here in the '20s, and probably there were some pretty prominent La Grande residents in it. As kids we didn't know what it all meant, but we were scared of them anyway. We didn't pay much attention to those guys, but when we saw them, we got out of there. There were quite a few of them around here, I think, and every so often they'd burn that cross up on the face of Table Mountain. I think they had their meetings in town, but some guys just went up there, started the cross, and stayed there. It was a wonder they didn't burn the whole place up. Of course, the high school kids used to burn an L up there, too.

Living Near a Cemetery Now Occupied by Eastern Oregon University

WT: Later on--about 1930--I lived in the house next to those steps. There were two houses up there on that hill. In fact, one is now at 5th and H. This was all prior to the time the college was built. [Eastern Oregon Normal School was built in 1929.] Before the college was built there, it was a big field, full of holes where they had moved the graves out of there and put the remains in the Hillcrest Cemetery [east of EOU campus]. It was called The Cemetery at that time. Why they moved those graves, I don't know, unless they just wanted to start a new cemetery. They left all the holes, and that's where we kids would play on that hill.

In fact, we set the whole thing on fire one time, with all the cheat grass up there. We'd light little fires and see if we could stomp them out. Once, it got away from us. Here came the fire engine, the fire chief, the chief of police, and everybody else. We got out of there in a hurry.

With being scared at night and living down on the end of G, next to a cemetery, we'd go to the show and come home at night. I'd have to walk from my friend's house, where Hoke Hall is, over to my house. Boy, I was scared to death, because that cemetery was right there. Walking in the dark, I wasn't too happy about that kind of a thing.

I: They didn't have street lights in those days.

WT: No, there was no street light and there was no street there--just a field and a path through it.

A Pumpkin Incident

WT: The first thing I ever got tangled up with in this town was when we came here. Mr. Bearden had the field back of Mary's step-dad's house; he had a big garden out there, which was part of the present college field, and he had a lot of pumpkins there. Nick Thomas, Mary's stepbrother, said, "Let's go get us some of those pumpkins. They belong to my uncle. He said we can have all of them that we want." So we went over there and were in the pumpkin patch when here came the sheriff, Jess Breshears. He nailed us, but I ran.

Mary's stepdad had a corral there by the house that he kept his cows in. I ran and got into the corral. The sheriff said, "Come on, Bill, come on, we're going to go to jail." He had my two brothers and two of the other kids rounded up, and I said, "No, I ain't going. No, I ain't going." I was about seven years old.

He took all of them up to the jail, at the courthouse. (They had a jail upstairs on the 2nd floor of the courthouse.) They put these kids in jail. When my dad come home from work, Mr. Thomas, Mary's stepdad, came over and told him, "The kids all got in jail this afternoon. I gave them a licking all the way across that field, and I gave your kids a licking, too." Dad said, "If I'd been there, I'd have given your kids a licking."

But I never did go to jail. I got out of it. I stayed in the corral. These dumb pumpkins belonged to Mr. Bearden, who used to live up here on the corner. That was the first mess of stuff I got tangled up in right after we came here from Kansas. A lot of it wasn't for the good of the country. Oh, we used to get in a lot of fun, though.

Being Afraid of Chinese Residents of La Grande

I: What do you remember about the Chinese?

WT: When I first came here, I'd never seen a Chinaman before, and I was scared to death of them. I'd seen lots of Mexicans and gypsies but not a Chinaman. There were a lot of Chinese there in Chinatown--below where the old Safeway store is now on 4th and Jefferson [Safeway store at this site vacated in 2002]. I didn't trust them. I was always afraid they were going to stab me with a knife.

When I lived in Old Town, we had a Chinaman that had a garden and sold produce. His name was Charlie.

The Chinese once in awhile would get into a battle--what they called the Tong wars. There were different Tongs, they said, and they'd get to fighting--having their little battles down there. I was always scared of them.

Roaming La Grande's Alleys

WT: I remember we kids used to roam up and down the alleys looking for whiskey bottles. We'd find a whiskey bottle, and we could sell it for ten cents. Of course, in those days whiskey was all made by bootleggers. About where the telephone company was on Adams, right next to that alley was a toilet. We kids would go in that toilet and hide from the Chinese, and we'd sell milk bottles and whiskey bottles. There was a fellow that would buy our whiskey bottles. He lived in the Foley Hotel. We kids went a-clanking up through there one day with a big bag of whiskey bottles, going through the lobby, and he said, "Don't ever do that again."

Tangling with a Bootlegger

I: Do you remember any particular thing about the bootleggers?

WT: Yes. I remember that the Harrisons were bootleggers. Sam Harrison, who lived on C Avenue, was a bootlegger. We knew he had a still somewhere, and he was making whiskey. We older kids in Old Town--John Rothwell, Earl Woods, and myself, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years old--couldn't figure out where he had that still, so we got to watching him.

We trailed him one night as he went up on the south hill above the reservoir. He had a still at a spring. That's where he was making his whiskey. When he left, we went in there and ran a batch of whiskey off through his still. We had a ten-gallon keg, and we brought the keg down to town--all us kids--and every kid in Old Town was drunk for a month.

Then we stole his still from him--went up and took the still with us. He had an idea who did it, but he couldn't do anything about it because making whiskey was against the law. We talked to one of the kids, Harry Mason, and said. "Go up to Sam and tell him we'll trade him his still back for a gallon of whiskey." Harry did, and Sam said, "I ought to shoot you, but I'll give you a gallon of whiskey for my still." So he got his still back and we got another gallon of whiskey, but the whiskey that we ran off through that still would make anybody sick. It was rotten. We couldn't find Earl Woods for about a day, and we finally located him in a woodshed. He had drunk a whole bunch of that whiskey and got sick, and he passed out in that woodshed. Old Sam Harrison was ready to shoot the whole bunch of us for stealing his still.

I: About what year was that?

WT: That was probably about 1932 or '33. There were a few bootleggers around. You could get a bottle of bootleg almost anytime, if you had the money.

I: When did prohibition go off?

WT: I think '33. The beer they brought in: I think it was called 3.2--alcoholic content. It was rotten stuff.

Scaring a Friend in an Empty House

WT: We used to pull the darndest things. There was an empty house--a two-room house with an attic--on D Avenue between 2nd and 1st. It had been empty for years and years, and we thought it was haunted. We'd go by there and thought, "We'll pull one over on this Earl Woods." We called him Pud. It was at night, and we got him down there and told him, "Inside that house, you go up in the attic. There's a bunch of whiskey stashed up there that some guy stashed." We had an old wooden ladder we stuck in there, and one of the guys got up in the attic.

When Earl put his head up through the scuttle hole going into the attic, this guy grabbed him around the neck--in the dark. Old Earl went out of there, I'm telling you. He was making tracks when he left there. He was scared of the dark anyway, and that's the reason we did it.

We'd also go up the alley behind the Blue Mountain Creamery [formerly located on Washington Avenue, now a parking lot], and we'd pick up a milk bottle or two off the back deck, and we'd go around the front door and sell them for a nickel--sell Mr. Tyler those same bottles back.

Blue Mountain Creamery, ca. 1923
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

Seeing Movies for Free or for a Nickel

WT: Down at the old Star Theater when I was a young kid, we got the bright idea--since we didn't have money to go to a show--to crawl up a telephone pole in the alley and go down on the roof. There were scuttle holes on the roof; we'd open up a scuttle hole and get in the attic. We'd cut holes through the wood with our pocket knives, and we'd lie up there and watch the movies.

There was no sound--all silent movies. One of the kids got to throwing stuff down on the people, and that ended that. They caught us up there. Here came the police.

I: Is that when Clint Haines was Chief of Police?

WT: Yes, Clint Haines and another guy named Cooper--Claude Cooper. I re-

Former Star Theater on Adams Avenue
ca. 1929
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

member he rode a motorcycle, and he had a sidecar. The police had an old Model T Ford red pickup with no top on it.

We made our own fun, a lot of it, because we didn't have any money, and neither did our parents. You didn't go and ask your dad for a dime; you didn't get it anyway because a dime was a dime. To get in the show, we'd just sneak in or any way we could get in.

They used to have a ticket taker at the Arcade Theater. It was a pretty fancy theater. He had a uniform on, and he took tickets at the door. If you'd slip a nickel to him, he'd let you in. He made more money, I think, than the theater did. We knew all the ins and outs on all the things to do.

A Pest House in Old Town

I: Wasn't there a pest house in Old Town?

WT: Yes. They called it the pest house because that's where they would take people that had a communicable disease to isolate them. That old place was empty, and we kids used to go up there and play around, messing around with .22s and live ammunition. Those crazy kids. We'd get up in the attic and have cowboy-and-Indian fights. One time the crazy kids down below started shooting bullets up through the attic, and that ended that. There was a kid that was running around with us; his name was Athol Oliver. My brother had come home from the Navy and brought a buddy with him, and they were with us. My brother's buddy told Athol, "Hold up that .22 box, and I'll shoot it out of your hand." Athol held up this .22 box and Gil--Gil was the guy's name--shot it out and also shot Athol's thumb off.

We used to play with live ammunition like that, and I don't know how we ever survived. A kid I ran around with, Walter Ford, and I were up at the high school field. We'd played hooky that day. We were walking across the field, and a kid named Mike Zupan had a pistol--a .22 pistol--and he cut the lead off of it, even with the brass, and left a little lead in there. He thought, "This is a blank." As we were walking across the field, I bent down to pick up something--a rock or something--and about that time I heard a snap. Walter grabbed his neck; Mike Zupan had shot that .22, which he thought was a blank shell, at us, and, when I bent down, it missed me and hit Walter in the neck. They hauled him off to the hospital. He was paralyzed on the left side--dragged his foot and couldn't use his arm. If I hadn't bent down, it would probably have hit me.

Arcade Theater (later the Liberty), ca. 1929
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

Another Shooting

WT: When I lived up on the corner of Cedar and K Avenue, we had a barn out back. My brother and another kid were going to build a cannon. They worked half a day building this cannon out of a piece of pipe and black powder. We were home in the evening, having supper, when we heard a big explosion out in the barn. Boy, this kid came out of there--two fingers blown off and a big piece of pipe in his arm. Just about killed him. He's the same guy that got his thumb shot off at the pest house, so he was minus a few fingers.

That's the kind of crazy stuff we used to do. We didn't have anything to do but get in trouble, it seemed like.

Building a Mock Saloon

WT: I remember that John Hutchison lived on H Avenue when I lived on G. Out behind his house he had an old small barn that they'd built, but they didn't finish it. We kids got in there and built a saloon. We each had a dog, and they were our horses. We put our dogs on a rope and let them run all over the field; the dogs had more fun than we kids did. In that old saloon we had built a bar, and we had bottles strung out for whiskey and stuff in it--supposed to be.

In those days when we were kids and the Depression came along, we didn't have anything, so we had to make up our own stuff. We'd sleigh ride in the winter. We'd go up to Slaughter Pond [on the southeast edge of La Grande] and ice skate in the wintertime. On the 2nd Street hill, the Hildebrandts, I think, lived at the top of the hill. Marvin Clark had a dairy up there. The road that goes up the hill to the reservoir is where we'd sleigh ride.

Free & Wholesome Activities in Old Town

WT: When I was about sixteen , seventeen, we lived in Old Town, at the foot of 2nd Street, and we used to go out there on the hill. Hell, all the kids and half the grownups in Old Town would come up on top of that hill at night, and we'd sleigh ride there--build a big bonfire and sleigh ride. I remember Jess Turnbow built a big toboggan and had kids and people and everybody else on that thing. That's one thing we did in the wintertime. We'd build a big bonfire up there and have a heck of a time. We just made our own entertain ment. We didn't have any money.

We had the Old Town gang and the northside gang. The railroad tracks were the borderline. You went across that line and you were going to get in trouble. But the odd part of it was most of the kids that lived in Old Town went with girls that lived on the north side, and the northside guys went with girls living on the south side.

Old Town people would get together and play cards or have house dances on Saturday nights at different houses. They'd move all the furniture out and roll up the rugs and dance. We used to go to house dances on Saturday nights, play pinochle, and that kind of thing.

Summers near Starkey

WT: We kids used to spend a lot of time in Starkey up at Gus Tsiatsos's [about twenty-five miles southwest of La Grande] because he married my future wife's stepsister. We'd go up there in the summertime, and Gus would say, "I've got to go to town today, and I don't want you kids messing around with those pigs or those calves." He'd no sooner get out of sight than we'd be down in the pig pen, riding pigs and calves. He'd come home and say, "You guys have been doing that." (He was a Greek and he could really rattle it off to you.)

One summer my brother and I and Mike and Nick, his wife's brothers, put up hay for him and for a guy up the lane from Gus's--Al Thornburg. (Later on he had a beer parlor here in town.) They had these wild horses up there. They'd work them about once a year, but they're wilder than the dickens. To harness them up, you had to get in the barn and throw a blindfold on one of them to harness it. They were that wild. They'd come at you, pawing with their front feet and every thing else. We'd hook those horses up to the dang machinery, and we wrecked more machinery than we made hay.

I remember one time Nick was on the mowing machine, with a team of wild horses hooked up to it. Something spooked them, and they took off, down through the field. Nick fell off the back of the mowing machine--went over backwards and got off that thing. Those horses went down through the field. When they hit the timber, one horse went one side of a tree, the other one went the other side, and the mowing machine hit the middle. It scattered mowing machine parts all over that field. When Nick fell off, he said, "I lost the can of Velvet. You guys see my can of Velvet?" He was worried about his tobacco and that mowing machine busted in a million pieces, the horses still going. It took us half a day the next day to find those horses.

My brother and I worked up there for two weeks for Gus, and when we got done, he gave us four wiener pigs, two each, and that was our wages for two weeks--wiener pigs. We brought them home, and my dad said, "OK." He grabbed them and built a pen out in the back yard for those pigs. We raised them, except one was a runt and never did grow. It was just a little thing, and it would follow you all over--a great pet. He followed us kids all over Old Town all summer, that pig. We finally gave him to a friend of mine that lived up the street, and he butchered that little pig. Those wiener pigs were worth about $1.00 apiece, I think.

Then we went over to Pete Able's, where the Starkey store is, and we put up his hay. Gus had a hay rake that he had just had fixed up. Nick took it and started down through the river with it and broke the tongue out of it. That ruined the hay rake. We ruined more machinery than we made money for, I'll tell you that. We spent a lot of time in Starkey--riding horses, riding the pigs, riding the calves, Gus chewing us out all the time.

Swimming Places

WT: Then we'd swim in the river.

I: At what they called "high banks"?

WT: Yes, down around high banks. The dump was right on the river [Grande Ronde River]. We swam right below in the river. I don't know how we ever kept from getting typhoid fever and everything else. We had another swimming place down at the river--down at the park, under the bridge.

I: Riverside Park [at north edge of La Grande]?

WT: Yes, Riverside Park. That's where I learned to swim. My brother threw me in and said, "Start swimming." Then we used to swim at Oro Dell, too [a small, early community at the base of Rooster Peak, where the Grande Ronde River enters the valley from the west]. We walked up there to a big swimming hole. One of the kids would mention, "Let's go swimming," and away we'd go. We'd stay up there all day long, come home hungry and tired and usually sunburnt--red as a beet. There was an old bridge that went across there. We used to swim below that rock slide--come a-banging down through there in a tub.

I: Was that about the time a boy was killed on Devil's Slide?

WT: I think it was before that. Then they built the swimming pool there--Crystal Plunge, by the viaduct [on 2nd Street, across the railroad track]. There was a kid who got killed in there--electrocuted. I can't remember his name. So they did away with the pool. It didn't last too many years. We used to go down there swimming, but the water was really cold. We didn't like it. We'd rather swim in the river.

Then we had another swimming pool where the weigh station is [on Highway 84, near Perry, northwest of La Grande].

I: Pine Cone?

WT: Yes, Pine Cone.

I: That water came right out of the river.

WT: Yes, right out of the river, but we didn't go in there because we didn't have the money. We always swam in the river and Cove [swimming pool, fed by natural springs].

I: Wasn't that fifteen miles away?

Drawing of Oro Dell & Rooster Peak, made in 1882 by D.H. Stearns
Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

WT: Yes. That was quite a hike, hitchhiking or riding our bicycles to get over there. We'd swim all day and then try to walk home at night and hitchhike a ride--hungry.

I: The warm water made you tired.

WT: Yes, took all the stuff out of you.

Cutting Off a Thumb

I: What happened when you cut your thumb off?

WT: That was kind of odd. I lived up on the end of 2nd Street, at the bottom of the hill. We had a big old tree that my brother and I decided to cut it down. We cut that tree down, and then I went around in the back of the house. We had a chopping block out there, and I started to split some of the wood. Then, boy, I whacked my thumb off. The axe came down, and off it went. I ran in the house and hollered at mom, "I cut my hand off," and ran out the front door.

Crystal Plunge swimming pool, ca. 1931
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

Dances and More Free Movies

I: Did you ever go to Zuber Hall [formerly on Washington Avenue]?

WT: Yes, down to Zuber Hall, but mostly we kids went to the Eagles. They were next to the Elks Lodge--right next door--because it was a cheaper dance. We'd get in for a dime or sneak in. They played mostly old time music at the Eagles; they played more modern music at Zuber Hall. At Eagles you could get in the balcony for free. A fellow that was a janitor at Central School, Mr. Lilly, took tickets there. At the dance on Saturday nights, he knew every kid in town, and, if you happened to be doing pretty well with him, he'd slip you in the door, but usually you could go upstairs for nothing. There were a lot of guys that would go upstairs. When they'd have a moonlight waltz, they'd turn the lights down. We'd all peel over the edge of the balcony and drop down on the dance floor. The balcony would be empty when they'd turn the lights back on.

We used to go to the show that way at the Arcade Theater. When the high school would have their homecoming

Pine Cone auto camp & swimming pool, ca. 1928-29
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

games, they'd have a big rally and bonfire. Then, after that, all the high school kids would all get into a line, a serpentine line, and go downtown. They'd be arm in arm and go into whatever stores were open--through the stores and through the pool halls--and then they'd go through the theater. We kids would get on the tail end of that, and, when they went through the theater, we'd drop off in there. The front seats would all fill up in the theater all of a sudden.

That's the way we got in the show quite a bit. Of course, a show in those days was ten cents, but nobody had a dime very often. That was a great deal when they had homecoming.

When the Circus Came to Town

I: You told me they used to march the elephants up 4th Street and then turn on K Avenue and go over on that hill before the college.

WT: Yes, the Barnum Circus came in every year. They used to come up there and pitch tents up on that flat. They usually stopped on K and 4th, get the fire hose out, and wash the elephants to get them cooled down. Then they'd use the elephants to put the tents up.

We kids always met the train. They always came in on a train very early in the morning, and we'd stick with them all day. They'd let us help put up the tents and put in the bleachers, and then we'd get a free ticket to the circus.

Later, if we stayed and helped tear down, we got lemonade and other goodies. So we'd put in a long day. We used to have a lot of fun up there and always looked forward to that circus coming to town.

Neighborhood & Downtown La Grande Businesses

I: The businesses around town: there was a grocery store almost in every neighborhood, wasn't there?

WT: Yes. On the corner of 6th and Penn, the Moores had a store called "Red and White Grocery" and one on 4th Street on the corner--that big, two-story house.

Mr. Pennington or Mr. Pembroke--I can't remember what his name was--kept half of us, when we first got married, from starving to death. He'd give us credit for our groceries. We'd finally pay him, but we'd have an awful time. There were two stores in Old Town; one was old man Spear's store.

I: On C Avenue?

WT: On C and 3rd. At one time, across the street there was another store for a short while. The one on the end of 4th Street was built by Mr. Hofmann--Hofmann's Grocery. And there was Joel's Grocery on Cedar. Across the tracks there were three or four little stores, and, of course, in town we had Epling's market on Adams, and, where the U.S. Bank is, a store called Big

Bear Grocery Store. At one time, there was a Piggly Wiggly where Globe [furniture store] is now.

Most of those little stores delivered. If you wanted groceries, you called them and they delivered them. Or, if you went to the store and bought them, they would deliver, which was really nice. Most of the people at that time bought most of their groceries on credit.

I: What were the the main stores downtown?

WT: Carr Furniture was where Zimmerman's later was. They built that building just about the time we came here. Across the street from it was Moon Drug, a wooden building, and next to Carr Furniture was an open area. Later J.C. Penney built there; they moved from Depot Street, next to the alley where Mamacita's is now.

Bohnenkamp's was in the next block, as well as First National Bank, Tiss's Music Shop, and Hill's clothing store. Above that, on the second floor, was the National Guard armory. The armory space had been a skating rink, where we used to go rollerskating.

Then Rexall Drug: I think it's been there forever. N.K. West was the clothing store across the street where Falk's was and then Bohnenkamp's, which burned out [in early 1990s]. The next block down Adams, on the corner, was Roy Farnum's automotive store, and next to him Lou Evans had a barbershop. Then the Big Bear Market and China Mary's Noodle Parlor was on the second floor. On the corner was a grocery store; I don't remember who owned that. Chris's was in there for a long time, but somebody was in there before that.

Across the street, where the Sacajawea Hotel was [demolished in 1970s], was a big restaurant called "The Black Cat."

On down Adams, my dad had an elec-

Former Grande Ronde Valley House, site of Moon Drugstore on Adams Avenue, ca. 1923
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

(next to former Star Theater, the present Granada Theater; building still in use in 2002), ca. 1927
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

tric shop, and Norman Frees had a garage: Norman Frees Chevrolet. Goss was across the street; he had Studebaker cars. Down from there was Moon's. Later, Sprouse Reitz had a store there and then Goss. Melville's [gift shop] was on the corner.

The city has changed since I came here.

I: Harry McCarthy came here in the 1930s, didn't he, to open Trotter's Men's Store?

WT: Yes. Trotter's Men's Store and west of that Birnie's Jewelry, the Arcade Theater, and, down the street about three or four doors was another theater called Sherry's Theater--later called the State Theater--and Wright's Drug Store. Across the street was Western Union and a restaurant; I can't remember the name of it.

I: Do you mean the Green Parrot in the Foley Hotel?

Bohnenkamp's Hardware on Adams Avenue (building still in use in 2002), ca. 1924-25
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

WT: Yes, I think so, and Al Thornburg had a beer parlor called the Stein Club, also across the street.

Hunting & Fishing

I: Did you hunt and fish?

WT: Yes, we used to go up to Morgan Lake [southwest of Table Mountain] for fishing. We would walk up there, fish all day, and walk back with a whole tub full of perch. Dad would say, "Just don't go back up there and do that again." He didn't want any more of those fish.

I: Did you ever fish in Catherine Creek in the days when the salmon came up?

WT: My dad did. I didn't, but I remember my dad used to go over there and fish for salmon. When we first came from Kansas, he fished on Indian Creek and caught a great big salmon. That was something; in Kansas you didn't have that kind of fishing. All you had was perch.

Sacajawea Hotel on Adams Avenue (building demolished in 1970s), ca. 1950s
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

I started hunting elk, I think, in about 1937, right after we got married, and I've hunted them every year since. For fishing I used to go down the Snake River quite a bit and up to Phillips [a reservoir between Baker City and Sumpter].

A Sudden Marriage

I: In what year did you and Mary get married?

WT: Mary graduated in '34, and we got married the next year--September, 1935. We've been married almost sixty seven years.

Mary was working for a Greek fellow that had a candy store downtown by the Arcade Theater (the Liberty Theater, as it was called later). I hauled bundles to the threshing machine in Ladd Canyon at Stockhoff's place. I worked there for two weeks and made $20, came back to town, and we got married. All we had was $20. I didn't have a job.

When we first got married, we lived in a little house up on Cedar, just off of D. It's still there, but they have built on to it since we lived in there. We rented that for $1.25 a month. The water was out in the yard, and a two-holer was out back. We had nothing. We had a hard time paying $1.25. We had kerosene lights. We didn't have electricity because we couldn't afford to have it turned on.

The house was empty when we moved in. We didn't have a thing, so my mother gave us a bed--mattress and springs--and some bedding. I went to Montgomery Ward and bought $20 worth of furniture--an unpainted table and a couple of chairs, an ironing board, and a couple of washtubs. Mary still has that ironing board. I made her a dressing table out of two orange crates.

The house had a cook stove in it, and that's all we had for heat. I don't know where we got a chair or two. We bought a set of dishes and some pots

Stores on north & south sides of Adams Avenue ca. 1945-46
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

and pans at Ward's. I think it cost $20 for the whole ball of wax. That's how we started out.

A Job Cutting Wood

WT: I went to work for a fellow in Old Town that lived on the corner of 4th and C. He had a buzz saw. Everybody in town burned wood. He went around town cutting up cord wood, and I got a job with him working on that saw. One of us put the wood on the saw and the other off-beared it. We got ten cents a cord for cutting wood. I could make, maybe, $2.50 a day if we got into a nice big pile of wood. We worked all day like heck. He had this old one-lung motor that I used to call Wisconsin Motor that would go banging along, and we sawed wood all winter.

Depression-era Work with WPA

WT: And then the WPA [Works Progress Administration, a federal Depression-era work program] came in and we worked that. I think we made $44 a month.

Bill and Mary Talbott on their wedding day, September 1, 1935
Photo courtesy of Bill Talbott

JI: But prices were comparable to what you were making.

WT: Oh, yes. You'd go downtown with a $5.00 bill, and you needed a car to haul your purchases home in, though, of course, nobody had a car. Mary's brother, Steve, before he got married, had a Model A Ford. Mary and I would borrow that to go downtown to haul our groceries home. You'd go down with $5.00 or $10.00, and you could get all kinds of groceries--a big box of apples for $2.00. It's a lot different than now, I'll tell you that.

Then we moved down on C Avenue right next to Turnbow's place. A fellow named Harvey Baker owned it. He rented that little two-room house. The house is still there. They've added on to it. I think our rent was $3.00 a month. The water was out in the back yard. Finally, Jess Turnbow came over, and he and I put the water in the house.

We didn't have a heating stove--just a cook stove--and that's what we heated the house with. Boy, in the wintertime, in those old houses with no insulation in them, the frost would be really thick inside in the middle of winter. We finally got the water inside.

I: By the way, wasn't Jess Turnbow supposed to be the strongest man in town?

WT: Yes, he was. I saw him take a strap, go around a piano, get it up on his back, and walk off with the piano on his

back. He was a strong, young man and a really nice guy. He always wore that big, old cowboy hat.

When we were living in that house and I was working on the WPA, I had to walk from there down to the county shops on the north side on V Avenue.

I: Where the old sugar beet factory used to be?

WT: Yes. I had to leave about an hour before work time and walk back in the evening. The county would haul us out somewhere, and we'd be shoveling snow or something some place.

I: How many hours a day did you work?

WT: Eight.

I: And how many days a week?

WT: We worked two weeks, five days a week, and then we were off two weeks. I got $44.00 a month. They didn't have welfare the way it is now, but they had places where they'd give you a slip to get government cheese or apples or stuff like that.

I: What we now call surplus?

WT: Yes. You could get some of that, plus the money, of course. We didn't have electricity in the house, and half the time we couldn't pay the water bill, so I'd go down and work it out with the city, maybe once a month.

I: But you didn't feel alone because everybody was in the same boat?

WT: Yes, if you needed something to eat, somebody would trade with you or give you something. They'd help you out if they had it. We used to go out and dig potatoes in the fields, get a sack of potatoes for digging potatoes, and we'd bring that home. Or maybe somebody would get a sack of apples and we'd trade. We didn't have much meat and no way to get it. Most of the meat we ate was hamburger, until hunting season came along and then we'd get a deer. Boy, we'd have a feast then. We just kept plugging along.

Getting a Steady Job

WT: I went to work for Frank Cleavinger, who had a moving and storage business here. Jess Turnbow worked for him for about thirty-five years. Since I was living next door to Jess, he finally got me a job with Frank. He had a brother named Del. They both drove trucks, and they kept the trucks in a barn on 2nd Street. I called my truck the "go-anywhere" truck.

We used to move people, and we'd haul long distance, too. We hauled to Portland and into Washington, and we always hauled the freight from the railroad. Everything came in, in those days, by rail. They had a freight house here; that was our first job every morning--to go to the freight house, get the freight, and deliver it around town to all the stores. Jess had the north side of Adams, and I had the south side--furniture to Bohnenkamp's and Zimmerman's; a lot of clothes going to Falk's; cigarettes and candy to different

places; Montgomery Ward. I worked for Frank for about three years. He finally sold out to Golan Epling, and Jess and I worked there. He put in a soft drink deal, along with his storage and moving, and then he had beer.

I remember one time the beer driver was off. Jess and I were non-union and the beer driver was union; he had to be. So Epling sent Jess and me with the truck to Portland to get a load of beer. We went to the brewery there to get the beer. The guy said, "We can't load you guys. You're non-union. But park your truck across the street, come back in a couple hours, and we'll have it loaded." So we came back, and it was parked over there, all loaded.

Trips between La Grande & Portland

WT: We started out of Portland, and a car started following us, clear to the other side of Troutdale, where they finally stopped us. There were five or six guys in this car--union guys. Jess was a great big, husky man, and, boy, nobody messed with him. One of these guys opened the door on Jess's side--Jess was driving--opened the door, reached in, trying to get the keys, and Jess said, "You're going to get that arm out of here, or I'll break it off and beat you over the head with it." They backed off and kept after us till we got down to about Cascade Locks. Then they quit us, and we came on home with that dang load of beer. We didn't go down there again for beer. Unions were pretty strong at that time, and, we being non-union, they weren't going to let us get away with that load of beer.

I: You became a union member, though, when you were an electrician?

WT: Yes. When I was an electrician, I belonged to IBW #48 out of Portland, and then they transferred all of Eastern Oregon to Pasco, Washington. It was #112 IBW and still is.

When I worked for Frank Cleavinger, we worked six days a week, eight hours a day for $21 a week. When we made the trips to Portland and back, we might load up furniture here [in La Grande] on a Friday, take off Friday evening for Portland, and not get to Portland till the next morning because it was all on the old highway. It took us ten hours one way. We would unload, turn around, and drive back. Sometimes we wouldn't get in here till Monday morning. We'd been working all weekend, and we'd start right out working Monday morning again. We never got any overtime--just straight time. Of course, he paid our meals, and that's about it. We'd get sleepy, stop, crawl in the back of the truck, wrap up in some of those blankets we had for the furniture, and go to sleep for awhile. No overtime.

When I got into the electrical union, of course, I'd get overtime if I worked overtime. After I got my license, I worked one summer and winter at Lime, Oregon, where they were rebuilding the lime plant. They had to pay you by 5:00 on Friday night, or they had to pay double time from then

on till you got your check. The checks used to come in on a Friday afternoon, but one Friday afternoon the checks didn't come in till Monday, and they had to pay us that whole weekend double time. They were moaning and groaning.

Learning the Electrician's Trade

I: When did you start learning to be an electrician?

WT: As I said, my dad had a shop here. He worked for the Highway Department when they built the highway shops--the old highway shops [on the Adams Avenue site of Safeway store built in 2002]. He wired that building as electrician. Then, when they got done, there was no work, so he went to work for the highway shops and worked there for about ten or twelve years. Then he got transferred to Portland to work on the interstate bridge as electrician.

In 1945, he moved back here and started another shop just behind Zimmerman's on Fir Street, across the alley. I went to work for him there, as a helper, for a couple of years, and then he moved back to Portland when times got tough again.

About 1952, I went to work for Doyle Zimmerman for a couple of years, working with Eddie Hudson. We laid rugs, linoleum, and tile. After that, I went to work for Buckley's Electric.

I: On Depot Street?

WT: Yes. After Buckley sold out, Jim Maldonaldo's father-in-law opened a shop on the corner of Adams and Depot, across from Rexall Drug. I went to work for him for a few years.

Qualifying for & Various Jobs as an Electrician

I: To get to work as an electrician, you had to take tests, didn't you?

WT: Yes, I took the electrician journeyman test from an electrician in La Grande, Roy Ramsey, in 1950. After he got out of his electrical work, he went in as an electrical inspector. Bob Munhall and I took our two exams together, down in Roy's basement one night, and passed. Right after that, I went to work for an electrical construction company out of Boise and wired the library at the college [Eastern Oregon College].

I: Walter Pierce Library?

WT: Yes. I had my journeyman card then. Where did I go then? Oh, I went to work for Bill Bohnenkamp for a couple of years. Then I worked for different contractors out of Portland--Watco Electric, Evergreen Electric, and Electrical Construction.

Mitch Asla and I worked together quite a bit. We went over to Hanford [nuclear reservation near Richland, Washington] and were over there awhile at the nuclear plant.

When I came back here, I worked for Bohnenkamp and then went to work at the college.

I: When you first went to work as electrician, had knob and tube [an older method of wiring] been phased out?

WT: Yes, that was pretty well gone. You got into a lot of knob-and-tube wiring in old houses, but it was all phased out. It was all Romex cable.

I: Did you use grounds at that time--two wires and a ground?

WT: That came after I went into it. We've had 220, 110, 440 volts--all three-wire. We'd have the three-wire, three-phase and four-wire, three-phase.

When Mitch and I came back from Hanford, Mr. Buckley called us. He had a contract at the new Central School [on K Street, near the high school]. He called us over from Hanford and said, "If you guys'll come back and wire the school, I've got all the material and here's the blueprints. Go up there. I'll leave you alone." So Mitch and I wired Central School. Then I went to work at the college as electrician and later on as the maintenance foreman. They didn't have a union there. I tried to get a withdrawal card from the union, but they said, "No, you're doing electrical work and can't get a withdrawal." That's when I quit the union. I said, "I'm not going to pay union dues and have no benefits." I retired in July, 1977.

Bill and Mary Talbott in 1974
Photo courtesy of Bill Talbott

Reflections on Changes in La Grande

I: What do you think are the biggest changes locally?

WT: I think the college is one of the big changes.

I: Do you remember why they picked that spot for the college and what was being said around town?

WT: I don't know why they picked that spot, but I know La Grande and Pendleton were both after that college, and La Grande--I don't know why--won out on it.

I: Possibly because of Walter Pierce's being governor at the time?

WT: Could have been, yes. Where H Street hill is, there was a big gravel pit--no street there. They dug the basement [of Inlow Hall, first building on EOC/EOU campus] with teams and fresnos [scrapers with handles]. They'd blast. They kept the horses in our barn at night. We kids would always make it up there about 6:00 in the evening. They'd get off work to ride those horses back down, and we'd water them in the creek by Clyde Winn's place.

I: This was in 1929?

WT: Yes. They'd keep the horses in our barn. We got to ride those horses all the time.

I: In those days, wasn't there quite an expanse between Old Town and New Town by the railroad, with no houses and a lot of vacant lots?

WT: Yes, especially on 4th Street--between here [5th & G] and the school--just a few houses along in there. You had the Sacred Heart Academy where the hospital [former St. Joseph's Hospital at 4th & L] was.

Over toward the college there weren't too many houses--just one or two. There were a few there on H, I, and J Avenues. Where the library [EOU Pierce Library] is now, there were a few houses, but the rest of that was a big flat.

The original sidewalks are still here, made by mixing cement with river gravel. In the Administration Building [later named Inlow hall] at the college, all that gravel also came from the river. They hauled it up there in wagons and had a big mixer. That's the hardest concrete in this town, I do believe, because I've tried to drill holes in that building lots of times. That is really hard stuff and the same in Ackerman, [formerly Ackerman School, now Ackerman Hall], too.

I: How long after the first college building was completed was Ackerman built?

WT: They built Ackerman in '35, and the other building was '29, about the time they built the Sacajawea Hotel.

I: Would you say that, as the years have gone by, you have done a lot better?

WT: Yes. I had a good friend named Jim Ingerson, who built houses in La Grande. In the summer and fall of '71, I owned a place on 4th Street, and I had a lot on 5th and G. He came by and said, "Why don't we build you a new house [on 5th and G]?" I said, "I can't build a new house. I have no money." He said, "I'll see about a loan. Work is real slow right now. I'll come down and I'll work for $5.00 an hour. I'll have my son Jerry help me, and he'll work for $3.00 an hour. I'll turn all my commissions--ten percent commissions--back to you." That's when we built my house; I did a lot of the work --wired, put in the furnace, and painted.

When I got done with this house, I had about $15,500 in it, complete, and now it's worth, I suppose, $75,000 or $80,000. Roy Miller built all the brick work on the front and the fireplace for $800. Isn't that something? You couldn't touch that brick now for $800. He worked all winter on the house, and we moved in in February, '72. I had borrowed $15,000 from Pioneer Bank and was scared to death to do it. It worried the heck out of me. When I rented the old house for a couple of years and then finally sold it, I paid the new one off and called her good.

Other Reflections

I: Is there anything that you'd rather have been than an electrician?

WT: I always thought I'd like to work for the Forest Service. I always wanted to work out in the woods or out in the mountains, but I got into electrical work and that's where I had to stay. Of course, in those days they didn't have much of a Forest Service. I never did really, really, really, really like electrical work. That's odd because I was in it for thirty years, but I never really liked it.

I: That was your way of making a living.

WT: Yes, I got stuck with it and I had to stay with it, but I didn't really enjoy doing that kind of work for some reason. I don't know. We had the one child--lost her when she was eighteen to cancer. We had a pretty rough go; she'd be in and out of the hospital. I had a heck of a big hospital bill. I finally sold the house on H Street and paid off those bills, but I still owed the hospital about $1,500.

We thought of adopting after that and then we kind of let that ride and didn't follow through on it. We didn't know whether we could handle it or not, so we gave that idea up. We don't have any grandkids--just nieces and nephews.

I'll be eighty-seven in December [2002]; Mary will be eighty-eight in September. I don't have any regrets.

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