

JACK EVANS

Union County resident for 47 years

AN ORAL HISTORY



Interviews in January, 1998 and
February, March, and September, 2003
at his home in La Grande OR

Interviewers: Jerry Gildemeister and Tom Madden

UNION COUNTY, OREGON HISTORY PROJECT

Affiliate of the Oregon Historical Society

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(revised from 2003)

UNION COUNTY, OREGON HISTORY PROJECT

An Affiliate of the Oregon Historical Society

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

In collaboration with Eastern Oregon University
Cove Improvement Club History Committee
Elgin Museum & Historical Society
Union Museum Society

Purposes

To record & publish oral histories of long-time Union County residents
&

To create a community encyclopedia

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Preface

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

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

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

About the Interviews and This Edited Version

The interviews with Jack Evans took place at his home in La Grande. At age 75, Jack showed his customary quickness of mind and physical vigor.

The first interviewer was Jerry Gildemeister, who was seeking information relevant to the Grande Ronde watershed. Tom Madden, a volunteer with the Union County, Oregon History Project, was the second interviewer. Jerry completed a one-hour interview in January, 1998, and Tom did one-hour interviews on February 12 and 29, March 18, and September 22, 2003.

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.

JE designates Jack Evans's words, *I* the interviewers'.

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Early Interest in History

I: You have a lifelong interest in history, and you're a professional historian and writer. When did you first become interested in history?

JE: I think this interest is probably born with you. As far back as I can remember, I wanted to know where a particular old road went, or, if there were older people, I'd ask them about what it was like when they were young. They were always amazed that a little kid would want to know these things. But I learned a lot about the area around Wallowa [in Wallowa County]. Some of those people could remember when the town was started. People who found my interest unusual were glad to tell me whatever they knew and I did remember quite a lot of it.

I: Were you originally from Wallowa?

JE: Yes. I was born there. I'm not descended from pioneers to this region, though. My parents came out from Kansas City the fall of 1922. The Bowman-Hicks Lumber Company of Kansas City had bought a mill in Oregon, and the person who was going to be its district manager, H.N. Ashby, was a depositor in the bank where my father worked in Dodson, which is a suburb of Kansas City. He told my dad he'd like for him to come out and work for them. My dad needed to leave the Kansas City area because in World War I he didn't get into the service because he nearly died from Spanish flu. It left him with pleurisy and other problems. His doctor had said, "You'd better get out of this

climate." He had a cousin who had died of tuberculosis. So my parents drove out here, not by the Oregon Trail route but by the southern route through New Mexico and Arizona and up through California. My mother had two brothers in Los Angeles.

They came to La Grande, and in 1922-23 Bowman-Hicks bought the mill in Wallowa, which at that time belonged to the Nibley-Mimnaugh Lumber Company. The mill had been established in 1907 by Charles Nibley, who was associated with David Eccles of the Oregon Lumber Company and the sugar company in La Grande. (The Mormons had a number of commercial and industrial operations in this part of the country.) My parents moved to Wallowa and I was born there.

I: Was Wallowa established in the 1880s?

JE: 1887, I think, was when the town was established by the Island City Mercantile and Milling Company (ICM&M). Their practice was to buy up attractive land, lay it out as a town, build the general store, and then sell the lots to make money. After the store had been subsidized for awhile and was on its own feet, whoever was operating it bought it. ICM &M never ended up really owning anything; they just sort of transferred it and created the town in the process. They built flour mills and general stores. The Wallowa flour mill was built in 1894. Enterprise [in Wallowa County] was started the same way by ICM &M's acquiring the land, laying out a square for a court

house, and building the big store and flour mill. Enterprise grew into a thriving little town and remains the county seat.

Native American Presence in Union County

I: Since we want to find out about Union County history, would you discuss the Native American population in the Grande Ronde Valley?

JE: As far as we know, the first tribe to claim dominance over this area was the Snakes, who were generally considered dangerous—people best avoided. This was in the early part of the 19th century. Peter Skene Ogden's journals are my source for this history.

The fur traders and trappers had fur brigades in the 1830s and '40s that went through here frequently. I don't think they had any trouble with anyone. There had been a treaty between the various tribes, that is, the Nez Perce, with a couple of trading areas down around Weiser [Idaho] and the Cayuse, who were closely related to the Nez Perce. The Cayuse tribe had arranged with the Snakes to occupy this valley, though I don't know what the terms of the agreement were; Ogden didn't mention that. He said they'd reached an agreement whereby the Cayuse would be controlling the valley in the future and this should make it easier to travel through it. But during the time it was Snake controlled, this valley was not considered a safe place to go. I think that was about 1828.

By the time the white emigrants came through, the Cayuse were not the only people who used it, though they spent their summers here gathering food for winter. The other confederated tribes—the Walla Wallas and the Umatillas to some extent—were here, and so were the Nez Perce, maybe not as plentifully as in some areas, but they were here. The Cayuse raised a lot of horses, and this valley was wonderful pasture for horses.

In the 1860s some fellow needed to buy horses. I think he was working on the Mullan Trail that they built over into Montana about that time. He came here to get horses and said their horses were wonderful and that the Indians were pretty sharp traders. He got some good ones that he took with him.

When David Douglas was traveling through the West, doing his nature study around 1818 or '20, he stopped at the old Fort Walla Walla near the mouth of the Walla Walla River. (Whatever is left of it, which might be foundations, is under water now.) Douglas was quite an explorer of everything and wandered all over the countryside. The factor [i.e., the commercial agent] at the Hudson's Bay Company post gave him a companion or two to go along. One was an Indian who could not speak English and one was the factor's son, who was just a kid. He couldn't speak English either, but he could speak French, and Douglas could speak French. So they had kind of a three-way interpretation going, and the boy, like any boy of his age, had a sense of humor. He always misinterpreted

whatever Douglas told the Indian who accompanied them. That kept him worried. Eventually, I think, he told the Indian that Douglas was a wizard and would change him into a bear or something. They made their trip up into the mountains. Douglas had wanted to look into the Grande Ronde Valley, but they persuaded him that it was too dangerous to go there, so they didn't go. But they must have hiked around Spout Springs [on the Tollgate Road between Elgin and Weston OR]. He was very energetic, forever spying some new plant and getting the seeds, wrapping them up in paper, and poking the paper in his pocket. By the end of the day he had these things protruding from him in all directions. The Indians referred to him as the Grass Man and thought he was crazy.

Douglas never did get to see the Grande Ronde Valley. He explored over around the headwaters of the Walla Walla River and other places and then went on his way. It would have been interesting to see what he thought of the valley. The journal in which he wrote his impressions has survived. He must have been a pretty nice person because he didn't just order the Indian, "Come on, we're gonna take a look at that." He said in his journal that he could not think of exposing anyone else to danger, so they turned back. This was not quite the attitude of many explorers, if you want to call him that.

I: So the Oregon Trail emigrants coming into the Grande Ronde Valley would most likely have encountered Cayuse Indians?

JE: Yes, mostly Cayuse. The tribes that have since become allied with them, or were at that time, all knew each other, but the Cayuse had very much exclusive use of it at that time. The emigrants coming through felt this would be a wonderful valley to establish a place to live, but it was too far from everything else, and there was no assurance that the Indians would always be friendly. So they didn't stay. Settlers weren't here until the fall of 1861, when they came back over the hill looking for gold.

I: Right. The gold rush kicked off that influx. Did that start Baker City about the same time?

JE: I don't think Baker City got started until about 1864, but Auburn [both in Baker County] began in 1861, about the same time as La Grande—the winter of 1861-62. The two counties have been a little different—mining in Baker and agriculture in Union. But the settlement occurred at just about the same time.

The tribes that were here had enjoyed trading with the emigrants. Usually the Indians were shrewd enough bargainers that they didn't often get taken by the pioneers. One Indian was disgruntled because he traded for a shirt that turned out to be threadbare, and the women laughed at him. I'm sure he was not happy, but that's the only case I know of where anybody was discontented. The relationships with the Indians were really pretty good here. Some people say that the name *Cop-Copi* means Valley of Peace. It doesn't; it means Place of Cotton-

woods. I don't think the Grande Ronde Valley was ever called the Valley of Peace, although it was a peaceful place for its time.

The only hostile act that has gotten into the history books was the raid that Colonel Shaw and his party of volunteers made in 1856—at the end of the Yakima war and the other Indian wars of that period. The Shaw party came over from Walla Walla in July of that year and whatever conference took place with the tribe didn't amount to anything. Then the shooting started. The tribe was camped where Riverside Park is today [i.e., at the northern edge of La Grande]. The troops came from what is now Summerville over through the little saddle just north of the park. They marched eight miles that morning and appeared suddenly. The Indians saw them, of course. What followed was a confrontation and general shooting, and some of the tribesmen tried to get away through the brush down the river. Many were hunted down; some got on horses and were followed by the volunteers to over around what is now Union [fifteen miles east of La Grande]. Shaw's command got separated; it was quite a mess. As it turned out, there probably weren't any able-bodied warriors with the tribal members at all. They were old men, women, and kids. Many of the Indians were shot. The Cayuse today say that there were fifty casualties, none of which were necessary, of course. These troops were not the regulars; they were volunteers, who figured there was a great plot among the Indians here to attack the whites, so

they were going to forestall that. Actually, the people here were on a food-gathering expedition, getting their food supply for winter. I think there were a hundred-fifty packhorse loads of roots and other food that they had gathered and quite a large number of horses. I think the volunteers burned all of the produce that the Indians had gathered, took the horses they wanted, and shot the rest. This is not a bright chapter in our history. For a long time it was handed down by people who had been around during that general period that these brave men had come over here and forestalled a big attack on all the pioneers. That was not true.

I: No. That's unfortunately an all-too-familiar story.

JE: It's the only episode of that kind right around here. There are stories told of extirpations of various kinds over in the Ochoco country, but how much of that is fiction and how much of it is fact I don't know. Some of it is probably true because white settlers made efforts to get the native out so they could go in and do their own thing—whether it was mining, agriculture, cattle, or timber. Yes, there are some dark pages in history. The Cherokees, who were run out of their homeland, were a highly educated people and might have contributed a great deal to Western civilization if they'd had the opportunity.

Beginnings of La Grande: Oregon Trail and Old Town

I: How did La Grande get started as a town?

JE: The old town of La Grande was established in the spring and summer of 1862. The old town area, during the emigration period, was a campground for the people in wagon trains. Mill Creek was handy, with a level bench, where they camped. It wasn't until 1861 that anything was done about settling it. In the fall of 1861 Daniel Chaplin asked a couple of fellows to help stake out a land claim for him. He told some others who spent the winter here, the first to do so, that in the spring he'd come back and lay out a town. He did that—laid out a town on part of his claim, which was the first settlement of La Grande. It's a typical Roman east-west, north-south grid. However, it was three degrees off and still is because they didn't compensate quite enough for the deviation of the compass. It's at a little bit of an angle, and I'm told that people who have surveyed lots up there in order to clear titles have had quite a time trying to compensate for the crooked lines.

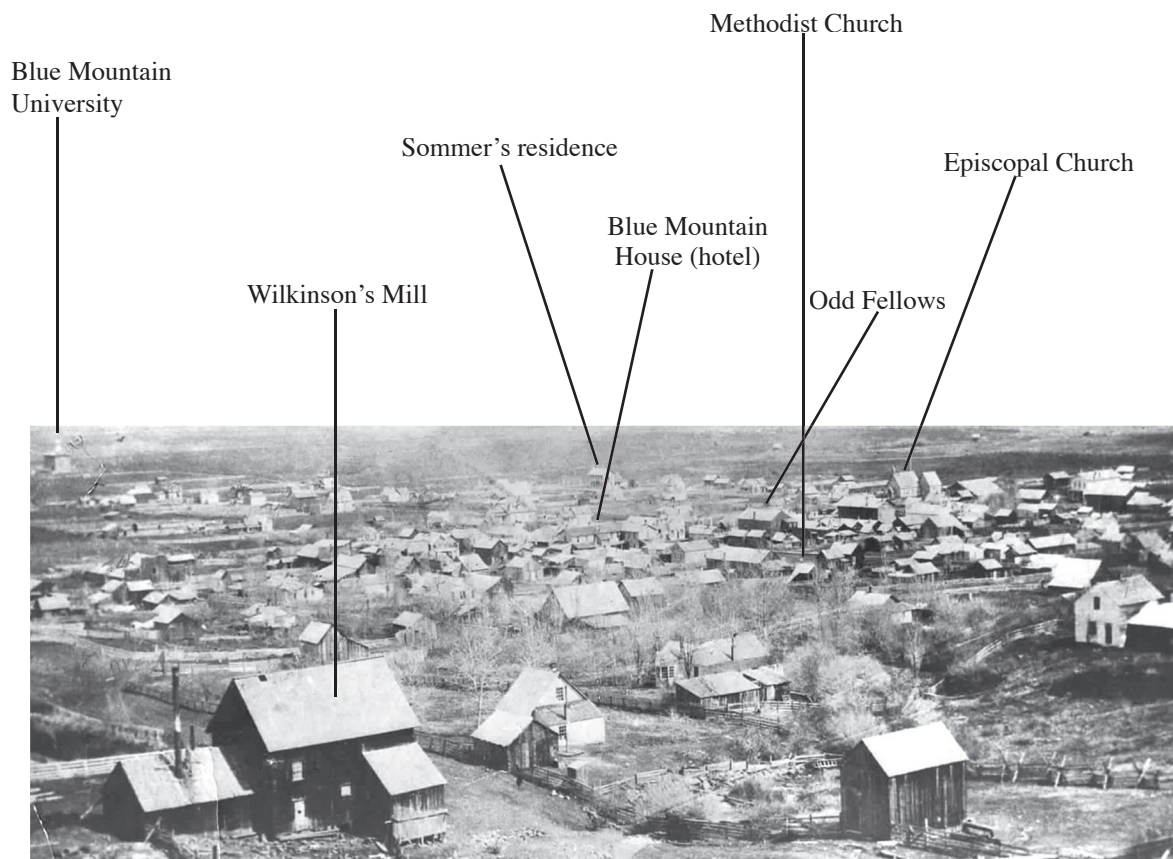
The original town was pretty well bounded by A through D or E Avenues and probably 1st through 4th Streets. Ben Brown's cabin, which was the first one to be completed, was at the corner of B and Cedar Streets, so that's a little bit beyond where the regular grid was.

There's an 1875 photograph with buildings identified by somebody who knew what they had been. One of those

business buildings is still standing--a false-fronted building that's a dwelling now but was, I believe, the tinsmith shop. There's almost nothing up there now to suggest that it had ever been the business area. As long as the Oregon Trail functioned—even after it became the government road in 1861, just before the town itself started—the Oregon Trail was B Avenue. It went up over the hill to the west. It was not until the late 1860s that the Meacham Brothers' toll road was built all the way down the Grande Ronde Canyon. Then they would not have to climb a mountain and descend it again. At that time B Avenue was the only street with stables and warehouses because it was on the main Oregon Trail road.

The road going west: I should say a little bit about that. When it was still the Oregon Trail up to 1860 or a little later, it went on up the draw at the end of B Avenue, along the bench, and then straight up over the ridge behind Table Mountain. Some of the wagons that went up there had to have as many as eighteen oxen hitched to them to get them up that steep climb. They couldn't go sidehill because they would tip the wagons over. The government in 1861 finally honored maybe the only one of the things they had agreed to do for the tribes in the area; this was to build a road around the south side of the reservation so that the emigrants wouldn't be tracking across it all the time, bringing disease and other problems with them.

The old road leaving La Grande had a switchback, you might say, installed in



La Grande's Old Town in about 1875
(before the railroad helped to create New Town)
Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

it so that, instead of going straight up, they started a little farther to the south on the bench and went up the mountainside at an angle. If you know where to look, the traces are still there, but they're very faint now. Beyond that, it followed the Oregon Trail pretty much across the ridge and over onto the plateau north of Morgan Lake. The old road is quite visible across there going west partly because it had been the Oregon Trail and also because it had become a freight road for everything that couldn't go by the stage road. Meacham Brothers' toll road was a stage road across the mountains, and that continued to operate. They were not handicapped in that way, but it was a toll road so most of the emigrant travel and a lot of the freight went the other way. The government road was only in use for a few years.

Fred Foster had taken over Meachams' station after Harvey Meacham was killed in 1872. He married Meacham's wife later on, having worked for them, and managed the toll road. He also built another road of his own, the Foster toll road. So by 1868 the road had been extended all the way down the Grande Ronde Canyon to the Grande Ronde Valley. After that, the old road across the flat up above was discontinued; it was a terrible thing to travel anyway. It was used, I think, by people to get up on top to herd stock, and for a little while in the 1870s it was used by people who had mining claims up there.

The road that came into La Grande after they reached the valley came through Oro Dell, which was at the

mouth of the canyon (underneath I-84 now). You can see a couple of foundations on the hillside, I think, to the north. The road then came along the western edge of town; the part that still survives is Sunset Drive. At the upper end of C Avenue, you came to the business district and went east along it. Fourth Street was extended to the north, I'm not sure how far. In 1884, of course, it would have run all the way down to the new town.

Coming of the Transcontinental Railroad

I: It was the arrival of the railroad that was the impetus for the building of the whole new town, right?

JE: Yes. La Grande was entirely what we now call Old Town until the railroad came through in 1884. Daniel Chaplin offered the railroad executives 105 acres for the purpose of establishing a division point here, thereby nosing out Union and North Powder as candidates for that facility. This was the ideal place for them to set up marshalling yards and make up the trains, using locally based engines to boost them over the Blue Mountains [east and west of La Grande].

There was nothing down there except a farmhouse or two—nothing where they wanted to put the railroad. It was all on Chaplin's land, and he had donated some of the land to the rail road and released more for platting as the town. All of the planning and sale of properties was taken care of by a firm in Portland that he engaged. There was a lot of speculation as people

bought up lots and resold them, and these changed hands numerous times in 1884 and 1885.

New Town, Wooden Buildings, and Fires

JE: By 1886 there were quite a few buildings; the new part of the town was pretty well established. A number of people and most of the businesses immediately moved from Old Town to trackside and built frame buildings to house all of their operations. Unfortunately, being a wooden town, it had the same problem that others did: it burned out the first time on August 4, 1886. The fire started in the back of Jay Brooks' clothing store on the south side of Adams, jumped Adams Avenue, and burned six or seven blocks--nearly all of the town that had been built at that time. This included the railroad depot, which had been finished in 1884. So the town was only two years old when the fire occurred.

They rebuilt it immediately, using brick for much of the new construction. The principal building in the new town was a big brick one put up by Aaron Sommer, a merchant who had a clothing store in Old Town. He moved down to New Town, put up a brick building, and also had his house moved to the intersection of 4th and Depot streets in New Town. It was a large, white one--the biggest in Old Town visible in the 1875 photograph of La Grande [see p. 6 and this page]. I think it's the oldest house in La Grande, built in 1872. It sat there for quite a long time till it was moved again, probably in 1912. I think the

Methodist Church must have acquired the land it sat on so that the new Methodist Church could be erected at that site in 1913. The Sommer house was moved to a point on Spring Street (905), facing south, just across from the Methodist Church. I don't think they had intended to run Spring Street through because there wasn't really room for it, but later they did run it through and that's why part of it is one-way and only one lane wide--kind of an afterthought.

More brick buildings were put up, though I think that the pattern there was still a predominance of wood-framed buildings. A very nice picture, probably taken from the top of a grain elevator in 1889, shows the view of the downtown area looking west: of all the buildings in that picture only one survives today--a brick house on 4th Street where Nettie Bushnell lived for many years, next door to the present Lester Real Estate house. I don't know who the original owner was. It was the house where Dr. Molitor lived in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The Sommer house was to the left and not in the picture.



House at 905 Spring Street as it appeared in 2004
Photo by Eugene Smith

The town prospered for awhile until the 4th of July, 1891. About eight in the evening a fire started in the kitchen of the Blue Mountain Hotel, on the south side of Washington Avenue, where the Elks Lodge is today. Again there was a wind to make it jump the street and burn more than four blocks, perhaps most of six. Aaron Sommer came back from Portland and put up a new building where the other brick one had been; that is the Sommer building that exists today [northeast corner of the Washington Avenue and Depot Street intersection]. It was put up in the fall of 1891 and remodeled to a more modern appearance in 1916. On the northeast corner of Adams and Depot was the Rogers building. Rogers had put up a one-story, brick drugstore there in 1888; when his business burned, he built a much bigger building, which still exists in heavily remodeled form. After the owners remodeled it in the 1970s, they called it the Phoenix Building.

Another fire, in December, 1891, burned the south side of Adams between Elm and Fir. That was the last major fire. There have been others since then that involved one building or part of a block. The other more or less spectacular one of the 19th century was the Pacific Company's grain elevator, which burned in 1893. It was then the tallest building in La Grande at ninety-five feet, across the street to the west from what for many years was La Grande Lumber Company and is now occupied by Miller's Home Center [on Greenwood Street]. The lot where it was is still empty. The lumber yard was Van Petten's for a long time, and I think it was the Wenhaha Lumber Company in 1917.

An Early Architect

- I: Do you think there was some architectural design and planning involved once they started building in brick, and, if so, who were some of the early architects?



North side of Adams Avenue, looking east from Depot Street intersection, ca. 1895
 Buildings (from left), all designed by Calvin Thornton:
 Rogers Block (now Phoenix Building), 1891-92; Steward Block, 1891; (beyond gap) La Grande National Bank, 1889 (may have survived 1891 fire; if not, replicated in 1892)
 Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

JE: I imagine there would have been involvement of architects when they were using wood. The person who desired the building would give for the architect an idea of what arrangement was needed and what kinds of spaces were required, and the architect did a sketch. They would talk about it--very much as it is done today, though probably a little less formally. When Calvin Thornton drew up the blueprints for the Mormon Tabernacle, which unfortunately is also gone, those were all done in pencil.

I: Was the Mormon Tabernacle in the block where *The Observer* building is now on 4th Street?

JE: Yes. Though it was a very fine building, the problem that the LDS [i.e., Latter Day Saints] had with it was that it was designed for a pedestrian population and there was no parking space. They had a large congregation, so they didn't have much choice but to relo-

cate. Of course, you can't very well relocate a large, brick building. They saved the stained glass and the organ, and that was about it.

Thornton designed the old Baptist Church, which, like the Mormon Tabernacle, was brick and stone and built in 1907. I have quite a lot of material on Thornton's life. Before he came here he had a drugstore in Weiser. I have no idea how he got his training, but he had some engineering ability and quite a bit of architectural talent. I think he came here in 1889, which would have been the right time to start contributing what he could to the area. His designs have an individual quality; he wasn't making statements as a lot of modern people do, designing something impractical just so it will be noticed. Thornton was trying to design elegant buildings that people could use.

Over the course of the next twenty



Mormon Tabernacle in La Grande, 1907
(4th Street between N and O Avenues, now demolished)
Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

years, he designed a great many buildings downtown, some of which are still standing--the Rogers building and the Ralston building on the opposite corner, where Lawrence's Jewelry is located. I think the bank building, where Mack and Sons has been until recently, was one of his because it was a very interesting design that I don't believe would have come from the hand of anybody else. He probably designed the Sommer Hotel, and he might have designed the Foley Hotel. He liked that style of architecture--what is now called Romanesque Revival. It went out of style about 1891 in other parts of the country, but it seems to have held on here for awhile. In some of the business buildings architectural historians refer to detail as being Queen Anne, but I think the only reason they do might be that some of the buildings had turrets on the corners and windows with marginal panes in various colors. The Geiser Grand Hotel in Baker City has a

turret on the corner and the Foley Hotel had one, too. But mostly those were Italianate designs, done in a time when rusticated stone, brick, and round arches--or segmental arches or combinations of them--were quite popular. These gave a hint of classical design but were, I think, more Romanesque than anything else. At least as I have studied architectural styles, they are.

The Slater Building

JE: The Slater Building on the corner of Fir and Jefferson--the one with the elaborate metal front on the Jefferson Avenue side--is probably a Thornton design.

I: Is that on the National Register of Historic Buildings?

JE: Yes, it is. I helped put it on for Bill Geddes when he had the building quite a few years ago. I couldn't find the architect listed anywhere, but I'm



Baptist Church in La Grande, designed by Calvin Thornton, 1907 (now demolished)

Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

pretty sure that was Thornton. The detailing on the east side looks like his work.

I: Would that be called an iron-front building?

JE: No, it's sheet metal--La Grande's only metal-front building. Those were done by a company in St. Louis--Mesker Brothers' Metal Fronts. Others have an elaborate oriel [i.e., large, often rounded, projecting window supported by a corbel or bracket], a fancy bay window, or really fancy cornice or other design on the front. Mesker produced all kinds of components--colonnades, friezes, plinths, brackets, cornices, parapets--everything you might need on a building. The components were all interchangeable so that they could be combined in a multitude of ways. The buildings didn't all have to look alike, so builders had a lot of fun with them.

I: It was almost like a new style--taking elements of an older style and mixing them, right?

JE: Yes. Like an Erector set, Lego, or Lincoln Logs and using these standardized components to come up with your own combinations. The front on the Slater Building, I would say, is more Italianate than anything else. Mesker developed them during the 1870s and '80s, and they came up into the twentieth century. The Meskers were attempting to design relatively fireproof buildings. If you had a metal front on your building, you had a lower insurance rate.

The old Sanborn fire insurance atlases, which are the best city plans we have of the period, were color-keyed so that a building was indicated as being brick or with a metal roof or metal-sided or whatever to indicate how much of a risk it was to insure it.



Slater Building (left) in La Grande, Spring, 1892 (southwest corner of First Street and Jefferson Avenue)
The space with two planks in front was Mr. Carper's business school, called Eastern Oregon College (first use of the name); the building had just been completed, and Carper was in process of moving in.

Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

The man responsible for the Slater Building was James H. Slater, who had been a congressman and an attorney in Salem for a long time. He and his family came west in a wagon train in 1853, I believe. He moved here in the '70s. He built it as commercial on the ground floor and offices upstairs, occupied by himself and two of his sons, James D. and Robert, who were in partnership with him. The partnership lasted, I imagine, till J.H. died. Robert went to Pendleton to practice and James D. took over the practice here. The other son was a sort of maverick because he became a builder. He built Riveria School, among other structures, and he built this house that we're sitting in. He listed himself as a contractor for a long time and in later years listed himself as an architect. He apparently had some architectural training to go along with building.

The Slater Building was still occupied by James D. Slater until the West Jacobson building was completed in 1913; it is still there and in use. He moved to the new site as soon as it was available because by that time Jefferson was not a terribly good location; something on Adams was preferable. But the Slater is a good building. I'm glad we have it because there aren't too many of the Mesker fronts left.

There was one other building downtown that had a largely metal front—where the Imperial Cafe was [on Depot between Jefferson and Adams]. The second floor had a big sheetmetal oriel window and above that a very elaborate metal cornice with a gabled pediment—a very handsome front.

There are a few pictures of it. It burned in 1966.

I: Where was it?

JE: It was where the Long Branch is now --just a little block building in between the two brick ones. In its heyday there was a brothel upstairs and a restaurant downstairs, which was not an uncommon combination.

Filling in between Old and New Towns and Street Naming

I: When did the old and new parts of La Grande combine?

JE: It was a long time before Old Town and New Town grew together. The area that was the residential part of Chaplin's addition to La Grande and also Green Arnold's [Chaplin's brother-in-law]--everything west of 4th and up, maybe, to Walnut--filled in pretty quickly. A lot of that activity continued into the 1920s. Quite a lot of that was more prestigious housing than you'd find in some of the less expensive residential areas. Main Avenue, where this house is located, was one of the better quality streets of that time; so were Spring and Washington. Washington was always called Washington Avenue, but where the diagonal part of it ends at 4th Street, Washington continues east-west as traditional streets do. At that point, where it crossed 4th, it became Park Avenue, then was Park up as far as it went. This got to be a nuisance, I think, to many people, and by the 1890s some blocks of it were referred to as Washington. By the early 1900s it was all

Washington; Park disappeared. The westward extension of Jefferson, beyond 4th, was first called Court Avenue.

Some of the other streets have been re-named or changed, though I can't think of any that were markedly different. There was O Avenue, and the next one is Penn. They probably didn't want to call it P Street for obvious reasons. Q was also avoided, but R and S are commonly used.

I: Don't the street names go all the way to Z?

JE: All the way to Z and then something else had to be substituted. You get into confusing situations when you run out of numbers or out of the alphabet and then have to fudge a little, as in some of the developments where all of the streets have names; this makes addresses a little more difficult to find. I often refer to what I consider a joke about Salem [i.e., Oregon State capital]: Church and State are not separated in Salem; they intersect a block west of the capital building.

Other Old Houses in La Grande, including the Evans's

I: Tell me about some of the notable residences that were built in New Town. Were most of them frame?

JE: Yes. Old-style balloon framing is a little different from the modern balloon-frame construction, in which the builder makes a wall one floor high, perhaps eight feet, stands it up, lays a platform on top of it, and puts up another eight-foot wall a chunk at a

time on top of that. But the original balloon-frame construction starts with the foundations and stands as tall as the house. It was a different kind of skeleton, but it was still a frame house. After the studs were put up, they were sort of scabbed together so that they stood, and then the floor joists were nailed into the studs. Firestops and sway braces were put up into the walls --say thirty-five-foot high walls, probably hollow all the way to the bottom if they didn't have firestops (and most did). Builders were well aware that fire going up inside of the wall could get away in a hurry.

I: What kind of material was used for the firestop?

JE: Ordinary two-by-fours--rough two-by-fours at that time.

I: Would they stop the draft air?

JE: Yes. There needed to be something to stop the draft. In those days buildings didn't have wiring, so they didn't have to do any boring, drilling, or threading. Until we got water systems, the plumbing was pretty rudimentary, too. Later, these older houses were retrofitted with wiring and plumbing. I think we had electricity here by 1891 and a decent water system that they could use for firefighting shortly after the second big fire--somewhere in the early '90s.

I: Are there older houses still standing?

JE: One brick is on 4th, probably built in 1884.

I: That's the one next to Lester Real Estate on 4th?

JE: Yes. I'm sure it was built about 1884. There are some up in Old Town that were probably built in 1870s. It would be hard to tell because a lot of them have been rebuilt several times, so there's nothing much to indicate what they were originally. I'd have to re-search the history of every single house in order to be sure about their age. The assessor's office guesses at them usually and says "about 1890" or "about 1900."

There was a time when a buyer of property got a thick abstract that gave the complete history of the property-- all the hands it had passed through and everything else clear back to the beginning when it was first sold from state lands. But that hasn't been done for a long time. They simply check the records to see that the property is free and clear for title insurance, which is the main consideration. For the history, an owner has to do research both at the courthouse and in the abstract and title company or some other firm that handles titles.



House on 4th Street, built in late 1880s, as it appeared in 2004
Photo by Eugene Smith

I: At least that information is available if people wanted to do the research.

JE: If someone wants to research a house, it can be done. For the one I've been living in, I've been lucky in many respects. It's only had a few owners. For the people who originally built it in 1892 there is a record of who they were and what business the man was in. When the house was built, Mrs. Conkey took out a loan from the bank. It was seven hundred dollars to be paid off at hundred dollars a year. The house cost eighteen hundred to build. By 1899 it was paid for, and once it was paid off, she sold it to the bank.

I: She sold the house to the bank?

JE: Not exactly to the bank. La Grande National Bank, later First National, seems to have owned quite a bit of property. She sold it to the cashier at the bank, F.L. Myers. He lived in it until 1908 and then moved into a big house that still stands at First and Spring. This house was owned by the bank until 1920, and they seem to have rented it out during that period.



The Evans's house on Main Street, built in 1892, as it appeared in 2004
Photo by Eugene Smith

In 1920 it was sold to the Moats family, who had it until 1961. We bought it from the man it was sold to, who had fixed it up somewhat. We've had it forty-one years and have largely restored it.

I: Who built it?

JE: The little item in the paper said that Charles Conkey was going to put up an eighteen-hundred-dollar house and John Slater was going to build it for him. I have no idea who designed it. Calvin Thornton might have. The floor plan is a little unusual in some respects, which makes me think that it probably didn't come out of a plan book.

Architectural Styles

I: Do you want to talk about the so-called Victorian style? Would you call this house Victorian?

JE: Yes. I guess, technically, that anything built between 1837 and 1901 is Victorian. A house built in 1901 or later is probably Edwardian, at least for a little while. But the principal early Victorian styles in America are Gothic, from the 1840s and '50s, and Greek Revival. Those really do look like Greek temples; most of them were back east and there are a few in the Willamette Valley, but none in this area.

I: With lots of columns?

JE: Yes. Usually Doric columns--some Ionic and some Corinthian. They had the fancy portico with the gabled pediment and a dentiled frieze. There's

nothing like that around here. The ones that do have columns are all much later--Classical Revival or Colonial Revival.

The next style in most cases after Gothic is the Renaissance Revival, which are usually big, square houses, with round-top windows and bracketed eaves; generally they don't have gables but they do have a hipped roof--or even a flat roof in some places. There are a lot of those around the Portland area that date from the '60s, '70s, and into the '80s. By the late '80s they were starting to put up Queen Anne houses, which generally had towers with conical roofs, fancy porch work, and a veranda that went part way around the house instead of the earlier smaller porches.

Our house is a version of Queen Anne called Eastlake because of the trim, which shows the infatuation with Japanese prints that continued for a long time late in the nineteenth century. We have a porch railing in an oriental-appearing design. Charles Eastlake was a tastemaker of the 1870s and '80s, who preached a return to simple designs. He said, "Get rid of all these curves, and let's get things returned to basic shapes." He was thinking along the lines of William Morris and some others. The term for their school escapes me, but it was a return to medieval styles.

I: The Pre-Raphaelites?

JE: Yes. Pre-Raphaelites. Rosetti and so forth. Eastlake reflected their temperament pretty much. But in this country

his style was interpreted a little differently. We had the curves of Renaissance Revival furniture with lots of carving and crests on top. So we changed to a new style, the Eastlake style, but it was the same furniture with the same kind of wood except it was square across the top; we just got rid of some of the curves. It stayed elaborate and Victorian.

I: Have you tried to find furniture that matches the style as much as you can?

JE: Up to a point and in a way. The styles we like best are Renaissance Revival. [pointing] That table is an Eastlake, a fair example of it, a little late. The styles that were probably used in 1892 when this house was built were likely golden oak, which is a little bit past the Eastlake style. I imagine golden oak would have been primarily what the Conkeys had. I like walnut better. It's just a matter of personal preference. And the styles were just about as intricate as the others. The sideboard here is probably more Queen Anne than Eastlake in that the decoration is simpler--not quite so fussy.

I: Were you able to preserve a number of the features you wanted in your house before they were remodeled away?

JE: The man who had bought the house was doing modernization, some of which was desirable in a way, but he had gone a little too far with some of it and he hadn't gone as far as he wanted to with other parts. We saved the porch, which he would have taken off, and some other things. I feel very lucky to have gotten a good Victorian

house. I have always liked them. But many have been changed a great deal.

Most Victorians have bay windows. In the 1850s, when Downing was designing Gothic houses, they all had bay windows that he referred to as conservatories; they were a place to put potted plants. They're also a good place to set a Christmas tree.

I: You have one bay window in your front parlor.

JE: Right. An archway connects the parlor to the entry. The sliding doors lead from the parlor into the room we're sitting in; I think this was always a dining room. Across the hall was a bedroom, and the room south of here was a bedroom. There was an open porch on the east side, which was enclosed during the 1930s or '40s, and used as a sleeping porch; now it is part of the sitting room, which is what the back bedroom has been turned into. One of the interesting things about the house design is that it had a bathroom built into it before plumbing was available; they knew plumbing was going to be here pretty quickly. There was a private passage that went from the bedroom back to the kitchen, and the bathroom was off of it. It was also available through a separate door. There were a lot of doors in the house, which I guess was common. But the private passage was a closet you could walk through all the way. One reason for this was that they didn't have clothes hangers, at least as a common thing, so there was a strip of batten down each side of the hall with hooks in it for hanging coats and shirts, as

you would on pegs. That has since become a closet and a place for the vanity in the bathroom.

The kitchen was still a nineteenth-century style. The remodeler had put in an island and some other things, but it wasn't a really large room like the old kitchens were. It had a pantry to keep the dishes, the sink in the corner, probably a worktable in the middle of the room, a big range on the wall, and a water tank. A wood lift that went down to the basement was no longer there when we moved in. All the meals, of course, were served in the dining room. It wasn't really intended for eating and socializing in the kitchen.

There was one narrow, open porch that fronted on the alley, so it was always dirty. When we remodeled the kitchen, we took in the back porch to give us an extra three feet; now it's a sizable room. It's nice to sit around the table out there. The back pantry was ideal for the washer and dryer, and the outside entrance is now there. So I would say this is a modernization that increased the comfort. It has evolved while we've been in it, but I've tried to save as much as I could of what was attractive and bring back some of the things that weren't here any longer.

I: You've done a great deal of the work yourself, haven't you?

JE: Quite a bit.

Bohnenkamp House: "The Castle"

I: The house we call "The Castle" on 2nd Street: what style would you call that?

JE: It's a Queen Anne, but it's a very late one. W.H. Bohnenkamp had that house built in 1907, the very end of the Victorian styles. I have no idea who the architect was. Nearly everything that was coming on at that time was either bungalow style, arts and crafts, or Colonial Revival. The thing that gives The Castle away as being a really late one is the railings around the porch--a Classical Revival porch. Those are Corinthian columns, and Palladian windows are up above--that is, a central window with a window on either side. There are some other touches that show that this is in the Colonial Revival era, late 1800s on to 1920. So it's a Queen Anne house with all kinds of Colonial Revival touches--maybe the last of its kind.



W.H. Bohnenkamp house at 2nd Street and Spring Avenue, as it looked about 1912
Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

Interestingly enough Mr. Bohnenkamp had a number of children, but by the time he built it they were not too far from having their own homes. By 1912, I believe, it had been converted to apartments, which is very early. There's a lot of original stuff in it. It would be nice to restore that one.

Ceilings have been lowered and above them the plaster has been all torn up by heating pipes being run every which way. You'd have to convert a lot of things. There's a big fireplace in the front parlor, which is walled up. Someone did finally locate the corner lights and the transom sash for the front entrance and got them fitted in; they look really nice. There have only been two genuine mansions in La Grande, and it's one of them.

The big houses up on the hill [on 2nd Street] that have wide porches with columns are Colonial Revival houses: the former Helm place is one, the former Reynolds place across the street to the south is another. The less ambitious ones are on Washington; our son lives in one. It has a columned porch across the front, but it isn't a bungalow. It's more of a Colonial Revival house than a bungalow.

Stange House*

I: Which is La Grande's other mansion?

JE: The other one is the Stange house.

I: How would you describe that house?

JE: It was the first big commission for Charles Miller, the La Grande archi-

tect. He described it as being a combination of Colonial and Federal. You can see the Federal design elements in it. It's a house that could have been built around 1820.

I: When was the house built?

JE: I think it was finished in 1923. Stange was a lumberman from Wisconsin, who had come out here quite a bit earlier to buy timber. He established the Mt. Emily Lumber Company, which is now Boise Cascade's La Grande plant. He did some nice things for La Grande. In 1912 he wanted shady streets, since he was from the Midwest and liked shade. He imported a large number of soft maples and planted them all up and down 2nd and 3rd. Some of them are still standing; they're getting very large, old, and rotten. They're not a long-life tree, but they grow fast and produced abundant shade. Those were his gift to the city. His house is about what you would expect--a mansion. There's an indoor fountain in the sun room, and in the basement there's a little theater with a stage; the kids did theatricals there.

I: I've been in the house a few times, but I've never really toured it.

JE: I toured it forty years ago, before they had done anything to it. It's been preserved very nicely.

*Editor's note: the original spelling of the Stange name included an *e*. In recent years, one of the owners decided that that spelling led to mispronunciations and dropped the *e*. For historical reasons, the original spelling is preferred.

Building Materials

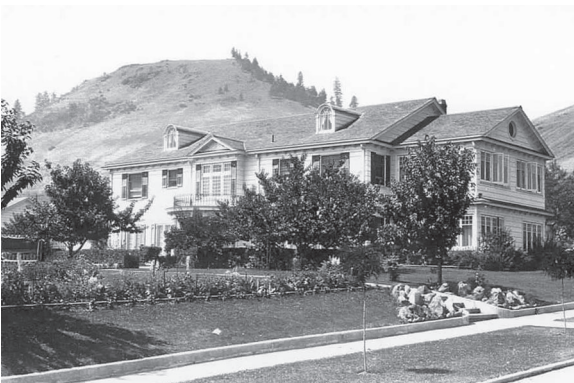
I: The original buildings in Old Town would have been made with logs, right?

JE: The very first ones, yes.

I: Were there sawmills later?

JE: There were several, though I haven't seen a list of sawmills. The one that's best known is Charles Fox's mill, which was located on the Grande Ronde River at Oro Dell, at the bottom of Fox Hill [northwest of La Grande]. It was certainly one of the early ones, started in 1863. But there must have been others because they brought a lot of timber out of Deal Canyon, above Robert Deal's place. Some of it was firewood, of course: they had to have firewood to burn. But there was a lot of good timber up there, and it looks pretty good today, too, a hundred and fifty years later.

The demand for timber, of course, had been great, so the very first thing they probably would have done was to get a



Home of August Stange family,
La Grande, ca. 1940

Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

sawmill established, since it's very labor intensive to hew logs by hand and hoist them into place. With boards, they could build rapidly, and the type of construction they used in those days was lots faster and simpler than the later types, though it certainly wasn't weatherproof. They simply stood boards on end with a batten up the joint and two-by-fours across the inside, at the bottom, and across middle, and across the top. There was a house in Old Town--it's been torn down now and has been gone for quite a few years--but maybe into the 1970s that building was still in use. At that time it was already over a hundred years old. It was a single-wall house, and all the door frames stuck into the room a good four inches. The space in between them was just the inside of that wall. It had been covered with wallpaper and other things years ago, but nobody had ever furred it out and put anything on the inside, which they sometimes did. So in winter it was a mighty cold house because the wind blew right through it. It was a pretty house but not a sound one. It wasn't till the 1880s probably that balloon-frame construction became generally accepted around here.

I: So for those first twenty years or so they used single-wall construction?

JE: Quite a lot of it.

I: What about a brick yard? Did that come later?

JE: Not too much later because Aaron Sommer, who was one of the early merchants, put up the first brick

building in La Grande sometime prior to 1882. I think most of the clay deposits came from the same area, around the Grande Ronde Canyon. There was a brick maker in early La Grande, who is mentioned in one of the very early directories, and there was a brickyard here until quite recently; the Jensens had it for a long time. There weren't any city directories in that period, but there were regional business directories. Any town that had any business in it usually advertised in the publication or got themselves listed because otherwise there wasn't any way they could have any advertising. The bricklayer mentioned in the 1867 directory may have been a fellow that put up the Sommer brick building.

I: I wanted to ask you about the name *Sommer*. The name of the town Summerville has different spelling. That has nothing to do with the name *Sommer*?

JE: No. The people in La Grande were Aaron and Daniel Sommer. The town of Summerville, according to *Oregon Geographic Names* [by Lewis A. McArthur, Oregon Historical Society Press, 1992, sixth edition], was named by the man who first put a building

there.* He named it after a friend of his in Salem, Alexander Sommerville, but he spelled it *Summerville*, which people would remember. They wouldn't think of the other spelling.

Early Newspapers in Union County

I: What do you know about two newspapers founded in the 1860s? I think one was a Democratic paper and the other Republican.

JE: They were both first printed in 1868. The very first one was the *Blue Mountain Times*, which was a Republican paper published by K.G. Baker, an attorney, and George Coggan, a businessman. I don't know very much about Baker. Coggan was killed during the Bannock uprising, near Pendleton, on July 12, 1878. Their first issue was printed on April 18, 1868. In later years a story was told by E.S. McComas, who published *The Mountain Sentinel* (later called *The Sentinel*), that there was a race between that paper and a Republican rival, each one trying to be the first to get their paper on the street. He said the first one—the Democrat paper—hit the street three or four hours ahead of the other. In fact *The Sentinel*, the



La Grande brickmaking yard, ca. 1920
(near Grande Ronde River northwest of La Grande)
Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

*According to Emery Oliver, who was born in Summerville and has lived there for 92 years, McArthur's explanation is incorrect. He said that a group of settlers in the late 1800s wanted to start a town north of the present Summerville and to call it Winterville. Instead, they started the town a few miles south and called it Summerville. [Interview with Emery Oliver, February 11, 2004]

Democrat paper, was actually two weeks later than *The Blue Mountain Times*.

E.S. McComas, An Interesting Man

JE: McComas was an interesting character, who probably should have a book written about him because he did so many things and what he did was often fascinating. He came here in 1862 and wrote one of the better diaries of the westward journey. He and the fellows he traveled with spent the winter at Auburn [near Baker City], working in the mines. He took a wagon all the way to The Dalles and back to get provisions for their winter stay. After the settlement era started in earnest, he became part of the La Grande business scene. He was always an entrepreneur or a busy man, you could say, one of the three fellows that got the first drug-store established in La Grande. He operated a hotel for awhile, hauled wood part of the time, and became the Register of Public Lands for awhile. He did all kinds of things.

Starting the newspaper gave him a good outlet for his personality, which was a little flamboyant. During the 1870s he agitated pretty strongly for a war of extermination with the tribes of the area, particularly the Nez Perce, because he felt that in Wallowa County they stood in the way of progress. He didn't hate them at all; he just thought they were in the way. I think he was influential to some extent because he blew some subjects out of proportion and said a few things that weren't so. There was a delegation to the legislature from that area insisting that

something be done about the Indians, but it all came to nothing, fortunately, and the Indians crossed the Snake River into Idaho. That was the end of that particular scare.

He wasn't just a yellow journalist in the worst sense of that term, but he didn't mind doing a little bit of sensational reporting or editorializing. His stuff is often colorful, he had a lot of news, and the paper was quite a lively one and, for its time, a pretty good one.

He published *The Sentinel* for about fourteen years. When the county seat was moved in the election of 1874, he moved along with it to Union and published the paper there because all business of the county was transacted there until 1904. In 1901 the county boundaries were redrawn, and La Grande knew it would get the county seat after the next election. It tried for it a time or two before then and didn't make it.

McComas finally retired about 1882 and continued with various other activities. He was always involved with promotions of one kind or another and traveled widely, usually with two big valises full of interesting things. As one of the people who have written about him said, he sold shares in mines that should be there and weren't or shares in a lake that might have medicinal properties, and lots in towns that hadn't been platted yet. He must have been a pretty good talker because he usually came home wealthy. The money disappeared quickly, so he had to go back on the road again.

When he came home, the first thing he did was to go down to the jail and bail out any Indians that had been arrested for drunkenness. He often brought strays home with him. One was a Chinese man, who had been stranded somewhere; he came along and was cook for E.S. for awhile. He did help unfortunate people--an unusual and interesting man.

Pretty much toward the end of his career he got into patent medicines. One of his friends was Chief Whirlwind of the Cayuse Nation, who went with him on the medicine-show circuit for some time. His line was Whirlwind Remedies; he dressed up in a fancy western suit like the one Buffalo Bill Cody wore when he did his show, and the chief usually appeared in full regalia.

In 1911, McComas died at the age of



E.S. McComas and Chief Whirlwind,
ca. 1890s

Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

seventy-two, when he was living near Wallowa. He had nieces, who later started writing about him. One of them who took a writing class in the 1930s wrote several versions of her memories of him, lightly fictionalized but obviously taken directly from life.

***The Observer* and Other Small Newspapers**

- I: Were the early newspapers weeklies?
- JE: Yes. They were all weeklies. *The Observer*, which started as a weekly on October 20, 1896, introduced a daily paper November 1, 1901, but it didn't take at first; in 1903 they went back to daily, and that form has been with us ever since. One or two others in La Grande tried it and failed because there just wasn't enough demand. But evidently somebody created the demand by providing the right content. All of this information is in an article I wrote that was printed in *The Observer* several years ago.



La Grande *Observer* building at Washington
Avenue and 6th Street, February, 1985
(now demolished)

Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

I: I imagine the technology of those early weeklies was pretty much hand-set type. The linotype machine came in the '80s or '90s, didn't it?

JE: Yes. For the very early ones the printer had a type font and a simple press with an ink roller. Mergenthaler's machines came along fairly late. I believe *The Observer* had one around 1900.

Those early printers were a different breed of people. If you read up on the old newspapers, you keep finding the same names. In Wallowa County there was a guy who had been working in La Grande; they moved around. Occasionally, someone tried to run a paper in a town the size of Flora or Summerville. They had a very uphill battle and had to be doing it for the love of the art. They really had to love newspaper publishing and like to see their work in print. Some of them certainly couldn't have made more than an absolute bare minimum of living. I have an issue, the only surviving one, of the *Summerville Annotator*. The only reason it survived is because of the kind of paper it was printed on. The regular stock paper hadn't been delivered before the deadline. So the editor printed on butcher paper he got from one of the local butchers; it's much better paper than the acid newsprint of the day, so the paper is crisp and rattly and still in pretty good shape.

I: The acid-based paper didn't survive long, I take it.

JE: No. The acid paper starts to decay

about as soon as it's printed. Most of the old newspapers that have survived are crumbling. They're so fragile you can't handle them. *The Observer* had a fairly complete file in its vaults. During the last years they were in the old building [at Washington and 6th, next to the present post office], the staff kept using the old issues to put interesting items in the current papers. By the time they were ready to move to the new building, the bindings were coming off and the papers themselves were disintegrating into loose sheets and pieces.

I: Did the Summerville paper last very long?

JE: No, I think it began and ended in 1890. I don't think it survived much longer than that. So many little towns made an effort to print a paper. Lostine [near Wallowa in Wallowa County] had a paper; it had a rough time, too, and was combined with one that covered the rest of the area. Wallowa had a paper, *The Wallowa News*, that was fairly well supported from 1911 and later became *The Wallowa Sun*, which lasted until 1944. The editor got bent out of shape over something with the people of the town--probably not feeling they were supporting him well enough. He moved it to Enterprise. Later Wallowa had another paper, *The Wallowa Record*, published by a couple of fellows who also published a paper in Elgin.

La Grande Drugstores

I: Let's talk about drugstores. You're

working now on research into early drugstores in La Grande. Please say more about the first one.

JE: For the first one three people combined their resources in order to get it started, so there must have been a fair demand for it. The three people involved were a man named Hulsey, a doctor; Robert Deal, for whom Deal Canyon was named; and E.S. McComas. Deal was a man of several occupations, as most of those people were. He was a farmer and a butcher, had a livery stable, and rented horses. McComas was Register of State Lands, operated a hotel part-time, and did several other things like the newspaper. Through their combined efforts they got the first drugstore going.

A few years later the Hulsey and Mahafee drugstore was apparently a going concern. Many of the early drugstores were established by doctors, which is a logical thing. They used a lot of medicines, and this would be one good way to get them, keep them all in one place, and maybe sell some of them on the side. So having the drugstore was a good idea. Another local doctor of the 1880s and '90s was E.D. Steincamp. Dr. Steincamp at one time had the drugstore in Granite, up in the mining country.

I: About when was the Hulsey-Deal-McComas drugstore in La Grande started?

JE: 1867.

I: Would it have been, and then, in Old Town?

JE: Yes. They waited a little longer for the drugstore, maybe, than some small towns did, but obviously there was a need for it with three people backing it.

I: Was there a competing drugstore at about the same time?

JE: None of the old directories I've consulted shows one until about 1881 or '82--a ten-year gap, at least. By 1883 the drugstore in Old Town was operated by Joseph Palmer; when the new town was established, he moved there and the drugstore became Newlin and Palmer. Ferdinand Newlin was the other person involved.

I: In those early drugstores wasn't the doctor really the pharmacist?

JE: Indeed, he was. If there wasn't a drugstore, he had to make his own pills if he couldn't order from some firm. Of course, if someone needed the medication in a hurry and it took a month-and-a-half to get it, the patient probably didn't survive long enough to try it out. They had to have a supply on hand, I would think.

I: Did drug stores sell other items--patent medicines, for example?

JE: Yes. There were a lot of patent medicines in those days before the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. Some of those medicines were quite effective, though there were little problems involved. For example, the soothing syrup for babies worked like a charm, but it was mostly laudanum, which is the same as opium and not at all that good for a child.

I: Wasn't laudanum occasionally mixed with alcohol?

JE: Yes. Paregoric [i.e., camphorated tincture of opium] was often used that way. The thing that made you feel better in the patent medicines--the bitters and so on--was the alcohol in them. You felt very pleasant.

I: The opium, too, would have had that effect.

JE: It would indeed. Too many people were becoming addicted to things like morphine and opium simply because the medicine worked and they took it. The patent medicines were mostly alcohol, flavored with a little bit of grass to give them an herbal appearance. Some of them were quite harmful, so the government had to apply some standards, which they did in 1906. Since then medicine has been a lot safer.

I: So in the 1860s and '70s drugstores could have sold any number of things without a prescription?

JE: Yes. They sold whatever was available. This was true up until World War II. You could buy almost any chemical you wanted through the drugstore.

I: Like arsenic, for instance?

JE: I was thinking of things like various dyes used in woodworking--logwood extract, alkanet root, and all those things used to color various finishes. Another was mercuric chloride that was used for browning steel.

I: People could walk in and buy them over the counter, right?

JE: Yes. Arsenic came in very handy sometimes. Lafayette C. Baker, who was something of a charlatan and not altogether honest, was head of the Secret Service during Lincoln's administration. He swore that he knew a lot about various congressmen and other people who had been involved in the assassination plot; he died of arsenic poisoning before he could reveal what he supposedly knew.

La Grande's Hospitals

I: I'd like to ask you another health-related question. What can you say about early hospitals in La Grande?

JE: The doctor in Wallowa when I was growing up had a fairly large building with upstairs rooms for patients. He conducted it as a kind of hospital, with his offices on the ground floor, and he lived next door to it. In La Grande the only one I know of that was actually called a hospital was the Grande Ronde Hospital, which was established



Former Grande Ronde Hospital, 1908
(now demolished)

Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

by three local doctors and opened in 1908. They were Dr. Molitor, Dr. Richardson, and Dr. Bacon. There was a need for a hospital, so they established Grande Ronde [located at the west end of Adams Avenue, now demolished]. The idea of a hospital was certainly prevalent during the 1880s and '90s, particularly the '90s, but getting one going was a different matter.

I: Most babies were born at home, were they not?

JE: Yes. Often midwives took care of that. If the doctor had a nurse and he made her available for childbirths, then it was a little more formal.

The brick building that Hot Lake sanitarium [editor's note: *sanitorium* is an alternate spelling] occupied [approx. six miles southeast of La Grande] was completed in 1906, designed by the same architect that designed the administration building at the college [i.e., Eastern Oregon Nor-



Hot Lake Sanitarium (southeast of La Grande) in its early days, ca. 1910s
Building on left is the brick facility built in 1906; wooden buildings it replaced (right) were erected in the late 1800s and were destroyed by fire in 1934.

Photo courtesy of Fred Hill

mal School, now Eastern Oregon University], John Bennes. He went on to Portland and designed buildings there for various places around the state; much of his work was for various campuses in the state's Higher Education System. The Hot Lake building was put up with the idea that it was to be a sanitarium--a hospital and curative facility. People could take the waters and recover from whatever ailments they had. It had also an operating room--a fully equipped hospital. It was quite busy--one of the best in the country, it was said at the time. That was into the 1920s until the time of the Depression. It was an important early hospital for this area.

An Old Ledger

I: You've told me you found an old ledger in Lee Johnson's collection. Could we talk about that?

JE: It is a big, heavy book, leather-bound in heavy boards, that belonged to a store or operation of some sort in Hilgard [approximately eleven miles northwest of La Grande]. I have no idea where he got it. This one, as with so many such things that are discarded, has no flyleaf, and whatever information it bore about the company or the firm it came from is missing. The first pages were torn out, and materials at the end were also torn out, so what we have is just the body of the thing. It starts as if someone wanted page one so they didn't get anything torn out but the flyleaf and probably the attached title page. It would be nice if we still had those pages. Whoever was cleaning out the storerooms or the old

offices would remove the identifying information, and then the rest of it normally went to the dump. This one didn't go to the dump, and I'm glad it didn't because it tells a great deal about what was being bought and sold at Hilgard, which was quite a bustling little place until fairly recently.

I know the names of some of the people who had mills up that way, but I have no idea what this business was or who operated it. I believe that it would be possible, if someone wanted to, to go through the 1880 census of Union County a page at a time--to find who was in business at Hilgard; that would take care of it. But that will be probably for someone else.* If I'm not mistaken, Daniel Chaplin had a mill there. He was quite a wise man when it came to business; he didn't just invest in real estate but also had a sawmill either at Meacham or Hilgard. I'm not sure which.

I: A book like this is the raw material of history, it seems to me.

JE: Yes, it is. This is evidence. If you don't have evidence, everything else is just a story. I know some very interesting stories that would be fun to substantiate, if it could be done.

The ledger begins in 1891 and goes through to 1894. A large part of their operation was buying ties for the railroad, though this was not the only thing they did there. The later part is in a different hand, written when they

*Note by JE: "I have performed that task since the interview was conducted but found nothing conclusive. I believe the ledger is from R.M. Steele's operation."

were apparently no longer supplying ties; it is mostly sales.

The railroad, when it was being built through the mountains in 1883, had to have a lot of ties. Most of the people who settled around Kamela and Meacham [approximately five and ten miles, respectively, northwest of Hilgard], had what are referred to frequently as homesteads; they were actually timber claims. Many of them made a living, probably precarious, by cutting ties for the railroad. According to the ledger, the place they unloaded the ties was Hilgard, rather than Kamela or Meacham. At that time they were paying twenty-six cents per tie, including one penny for loading the ties. Though this was hard, strenuous work, a few fellows brought in one or two thousand ties and got a sizable chunk of money in exchange for them. But for the most part the ties were in dribbles of two hundred or so. Considering that men had to select a tree of the right diameter--around ten inches or better--they also had to cut them to length and adze them on two sides so that there would be a flat underside to lie on the roadbed and a flat upper side to spike the plates to for the track. The ties were spaced about two feet apart and weren't creosoted, so they rotted fairly quickly. It was a matter of constant replacement.

The branch line [from La Grande] to Elgin was completed in 1891; some of the ledger entries are for Elgin. Ties were also cut for the branch-line extension to Joseph. And for an undetermined length of time after that, there were supplies for replacements.

Eventually, ties were mill-produced; I suppose some mills specialized in that. Perhaps the large mill that was at Hilgard did that. They were milled on all four sides and eventually creosoted or pressure treated.

I: What kind of wood was this, fir or pine, perhaps?

JE: I imagine that they probably used anything they could get. When they were completing the line, it would have been pine, I'm sure--certainly fir, which is much more durable, whenever they could find it. I think the supply of tamarack, as we call it, was pretty well depleted there, when I think how many it would take to do 50 miles of railroad, for example. They were building through pretty much virgin country, so hiring people to cut the ties was a reasonable solution to the supply problem.

Passenger Train Service

I: If the main line was completed in 1884, when did the first passenger train come through?

JE: The first train came into La Grande on the 4th of July, 1884, marking the completion of the track. But regular passenger service didn't start until about the nineteenth. Freight, of course, came sooner than that because a lot of them carried the rails, ties, and whatnot to the end of the line.

I: Were they building from both directions?

JE: Yes, they were. The line through here from the west was the Oregon Railway and Navigation Company, OR&N, which belonged to Henry Villard. He went broke through overextending on the Great Northern, so it came to a halt. He turned over his operation to the Union Pacific, who took just the name and used it as a wholly owned subsidiary. For the purposes of building to meet it, Union Pacific had started the Oregon Short Line, another wholly owned subsidiary, and ran it west. The two lines met in Huntington in November, 1884. Around the turn of the century the OR&N became the OWR&N [Oregon Washington Railway and Navigation Company].



First passenger train to arrive at La Grande depot, 1884
Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

- I: So the train that came in here came from the east?
- JE: No, it came from Portland. By the 4th of July it could come this far to celebrate the arrival of the train in La Grande. They probably had another celebration a little later when the track reached Baker City and then Huntington.
- I: Somebody could have gone from La Grande to Portland and back by when?
- JE: By late July.
- I: And then by late fall, they would have been able to go all the way east?

Contrasts in Travel Time for Emigrants

- JE: Yes, starting with the joining of the rails at Huntington. The trip west in covered wagons had first taken six months; by the 1860s or '70s when there was plenty of feed available along the way for horses and mules, it took about three months. Stagecoaches went faster, but they had to change horses pretty often, so it still took awhile. As soon as the tracks were joined, they inaugurated the complete emigrant service from either Omaha or Kansas City that took three-and-a-half days from there to Portland. It was really a revolution; it's hard to realize today how much of a step that was--a little bit like landing on the moon, just one of those things that might get done someday.

The first emigrants left as early in the year as they could. High water usually

held them up, but they got away in May. It was around the first of November when they hit the Willamette Valley. So it was a precarious trip. By the time they got as far as the Blue Mountains [surrounding the Grande Ronde Valley], it was usually October, and they had to worry about early snows. By the time they got down to The Dalles one hundred seventy-seven miles west of La Grande, on the Columbia River], a lot of them built rafts and rafted to Portland. But by 1845 Barlow built his road around Mt. Hood, and they went in that way, which was faster and better for wagons. The only problem was early snow that could catch them there easily because it was usually November by the time they got there.

- I: Three-and-a-half days versus six months. What a change!
- JE: The typical emigrant family after 1884 hired a railway boxcar, packing all their possessions in one half and some of their animals in the other half. They lived in there and looked after their property. Three-and-a-half days later they arrived in Portland and unloaded. It wouldn't have been a very pleasant trip, all things considered, but it took only three-and-a-half days.
- I: I have relatives who made that trip in the late '80s. Their trip from Wisconsin to Montana took a couple of days, I think.
- JE: It was still a sizeable savings in time and a terrific savings in money. They had to pay a little bit up front, but they didn't have to starve to death part of

the way and risk getting trapped in blizzards or hurt by hostile people. Even if the train got stopped by a heavy snow in the mountains, the crews got it out pretty quickly. The trip was certainly much better than getting trapped in the Sierras, like the Donner party. They couldn't get through and no help was available.

Other Branch Railroad Lines in Union County

- I: Let's talk more about branch lines, especially the one from La Grande to Elgin and later to Joseph.
- JE: They started it very shortly after they finished the main line through here and established the division point. I'm not sure exactly when they started across the valley. They went out to Island City [two miles northeast of La Grande] and from there over to Alicel [five miles northeast of Island City], where a little station was established for the farmers to get their produce or their grain to market, then to Imbler [four miles northeast of Alicel], and finally on into Elgin [eight miles north of Imbler]. That was the end of the track for quite awhile. It was important to get the line that far because the Palmer Lumber Company had a lot of holdings around Lookingglass [north of Elgin] and they wanted to have access to a line. This was strong incentive to the Union Pacific to put the line in. The people in Elgin had expected that mill would be right there, and they would become a flourishing metropolis. They were dismayed to see all those trainloads of logs coming right on through town and to La

Grande. Palmer didn't want to relocate his plant. You can't really blame him. It wasn't until 1908 that they finished running the line on up to Joseph, and by that time Palmer had built the mill up Lookingglass Creek.

- I: But the mill was ultimately built in Elgin.
- JE: I'm not sure about the first in Elgin. By the time the railroad got to Wallowa, there were mills that supplied people locally. The town of Wallowa wasn't established till 1887, Enterprise a little later. The line stopped at Joseph, the oldest rail town in the valley. The mills generally followed the arrival of the railroad because there was no other way to ship anything.
- I: What about other branch lines around here? Wasn't there a branch up the Grande Ronde River towards Ukiah?
- JE: Yes, there was. That was the Mt. Emily Lumber Company's own railroad that went from Hilgard to Starkey [approximately twenty miles southwest of La Grande]. The Starkey track was the main one, and they had spurs all over the hills where they were doing the logging. The Grande Ronde Lumber Company [located at Perry, three miles west of La Grande], might have used parts of the railroad line before. They had one that ran up Five Points Creek at least to Camp One. (There's a meadow up there still called Camp One.)
- There was another little branch railroad located where the wrecking yard is east of La Grande, at Pierce Lane

and the Union highway, old US 30. In the early 1900s it was the Hunter and Fox mill, and by 1915 or '20 it was called the Masters-Ewoldt Lumber Company. By the time I remember it, 1933 or '34, it was called the Lone Pine Lumber Company because it was very close to where the lone pine tree, a local landmark, stood. The company probably died during the Depression, and the plant burned. But that wasn't too much of a line. It had at least one logging engine that ran on their track up Ladd Canyon a few miles and on spurs up side canyons, where they cut timber.

I: Might it have been narrow gauge?

JE: I think it might have been. I don't know.

I: What gauge was the Mt. Emily Lumber Company railroad?

JE: It was standard gauge.

I: I've seen traces of the roadbed up the canyon there.



Engine belonging to Masters-Ewoldt Lumber Company, operated from Lone Pine (east of La Grande), 1920s

Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

JE: Yes, and not too awfully long ago the old trestles across the river still existed, with no track on them, but they're all gone now. Many of them were on the opposite side of the river from where the highway is now. At the Mt. Emily Starkey camp, they had shops and quite a little company town, which still exists as cabins that are still used for summer living.

I: The railroad probably had a Y at the camp to turn things around.

JE: Yes, no roundhouse but there was a Y and spurs that ran every which-way. The logging companies had lines of their own simply in order to get their product to market.

When the Grande Ronde Lumber Company moved from Perry in 1927 and rebuilt at Pondosa [approximately forty-five miles southeast of La Grande], which was their own company town, they had to build a line that went from Pondosa to meet the railroad track. That was the Big Creek and Telocaset Railway, strictly a logging operation.



Y at Mt. Emily Lumber Camp (near Starkey), 1940s

Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

Lee Johnson's Beliefs about History*

- I: As I recall, you have several other ledgers from Lee Johnson's collection. Correct?
- JE: Yes, along with many of his papers that I've been sorting. They took up a lot of space in his den. Some is obviously for discard, but there is still quite a wealth of material on forgotten subjects. I don't think that it could be replaced. Lee knew about many things that nobody knows about now and had various kinds of documentary evidence as to their nature. He was always interested in things that hadn't really been explained historically and was always fascinated by interesting characters. He wasn't a history professor who believed in the broad-sweep-of-history concept in which no individual is important and everything is a mass movement that nobody can be blamed or praised for. He didn't say dates don't matter; you have to have the date because that's a pivotal point. You've got to be able to tie an event into its context. If you can't tie it to context, it's worthless and the context suffers. The standard thing he concentrated on was people who were memorable for one reason or another—magnificent charlatans or those active in other ways that he thought were unusual and remarkable. For example, a Union County man advertised in eastern papers lots for sale in the city of Union for a hundred dollars. Some people bought them, and some even

*Editor's note: Lee Johnson had a long career as a teacher and professor of history, first at La Grande High school and later at Eastern Oregon College/University. He died in 2003.

came out here to look at their property. When they did, they found they were lots in the cemetery.

- I: He could claim he wasn't guilty of false advertising.
- JE: Absolutely not. They were buildable lots, though your cellar could only be six feet deep and three feet wide.

La Grande's Libraries

- I: I wanted to ask you about one other building in town--La Grande's Carnegie Library. As we speak, there are plans for a new library in the works. What was Carnegie's mission to build libraries as it impacted a town like La Grande?
- JE: His actions influenced learning, refinement, and education all over the country. Carnegie, like a lot of other people of his generation, came over here with nothing from the old country, in his case Scotland. In those days men could really do what Horatio Alger books were all about: succeed by dint of hard work, though Horatio Alger always fudged a bit. His hero always married the boss's daughter. But Carnegie did it on his own merits. Having made his fortune, he engaged in some kinds of philanthropy. He may have been a tough old boy, but he did do a lot for the country. The bigger the city, the bigger the library. Union has a Carnegie Library, La Grande has one, a lot of other towns have them. They are pretty good buildings and served their purpose very well. The problem with them today is that they were not designed for our time. In some cases

they have to be adapted so much that it's better not to do it. There is a limit to how far you can go, especially with all the electronic capabilities we have today. You almost have to have a new building, and I think that's the only way to go.

I like very much the idea of what the new La Grande library is apparently going to be. The old building still has problems; I don't know what it will be used for. One of the curses of our civilization is that a flat roof is the most practical in terms of building materials. They should all be gabled, I think, and then they wouldn't leak quite as badly. Ours suffered because somebody — with poor judgment or maybe ignorance — tried to improve the appearance by sandblasting the walls. That took all of the glaze off the bricks and made them soak up water like a sponge; the water migrates through to the inside of the building, and that has damaged it considerably. The city has done some really good things in the way of strengthening the structure and making it more lasting. But it was made for a different kind of user, having been built in 1913. It has a fireplace in the west end. I imagine a cheerful fire in there on a winter day would be very attractive, but the fireplace is covered up and may not be usable anymore. As to what might be done with it after it ceases to be a library, I don't really know.

Geographic Changes in the Grande Ronde Valley

I: What are your observations about the geographical changes in the Grande Ronde Valley, including vegetation?

JE: Crossing the valley by car when I was little in the '30s, what I noticed mostly was that the farms were smaller than they are now, by and large, and had lots of windbreaks. It has only been in the last forty years or so that you can see miles and miles of nothing at all. The trees, brush, and fence rows have all been eliminated in order to get the highest yield feasible, which is good and bad. I used to joke about some fellow over by Union whose field blew away every winter, referring to it as our annual soil-exchange program with Umatilla County.

I: Yes, and that's still happening; every time the soil dries out the wind blows.

JE: Then you get a real dust storm. But the river: it took them a long time to turn the whole thing into a canal between Oro Dell [at the west edge of La Grande] and Mt. Harris [near Imbler, on the east side of the valley]. but they got the job done.* I understand that it was the railroad that was responsible for a good deal of the river straightening because they wanted to avoid having their yards flooded. I imagine the city was happy about it because they were tired of having part of the downtown under water every time there was a spate in spring.

*Editor's note: This is a reference to the fact that the Grande Ronde River originally followed a circuitous course through the valley and caused frequent flooding in spring until it was made into a canal.

I: Some of the old pictures show flood-outs way up on Jefferson Avenue.

JE: There's that nice picture of the Slater building that was sandbagged pretty heavily. The river channels in the valley, which had originally begun as ditches, have reached the point where the banks are twenty feet high and the water is twenty or thirty feet across. When I was in my teens, I came with a friend to hunt ducks at the lower end of the big field that's just the other side of Rinehart [approximately three miles south of Elgin], where the river goes into that pretty little rocky gorge that the highway used to go through. The end of that field at that time was all slough, now drained. Sloughs were the perfect place to hunt. There was a blind in there, a nice one with a wood floor and a screen across the front. We could sit there, have a cup of coffee, and take a whack at a duck whenever a flock flew in. There's nothing of that remaining today--just a big field.

I: What type of vegetation was in that slough area?

JE: I don't remember anything different than what's there today--the same kind of brush, more of it probably, mostly willow and alder. I recall there were probably more cottonwoods along the river at that time. The gorge was always a pretty little spot, and it hasn't changed much, though you can't drive through it anymore. It would be nice if it could be repaved to make a little scenic wayside. That part of the river has changed very little.

Trips to Hot Lake with my family in

the 1930s were to there and back, maybe staying over a weekend. The thing I remember best about it is the trees that are still there--the avenue of cottonwoods along the foot of the hill where the spring ran. It was a beautiful avenue to walk down, which we did when I was a kid. Around the lake itself and from there out into the valley for quite a ways was marshy, as it still is. In that kind of country nothing much but brush can grow. I've forgotten when it was that they planted all those willows along the highway--the willows and the Russian olives. Maybe during the 1920s. Prior to that I doubt if anything but brush grew out there, mostly willow and thorn.

There were some things about vegetation that have puzzled me for a time. One expert opinion I've read tells us that red-topped grass, for example, is an introduced species not native to the area. But the first pioneers through here remarked that the red-topped grass in the valley was as high as a horse's belly--which makes me wonder just who introduced it. There was another opinion that, anytime you see sagebrush, you're looking at overgrazed land that the sagebrush has moved into. This leads me to wonder if it really was the cattlemen who brought it in because the earliest pioneers complained bitterly about the endless miles of sagebrush. Craig Mountain [near Hot Lake, approximately six miles southeast of La Grande] and Ramo Flat [south of Union] are all sagebrush; I imagine it always was sagebrush. We're in semi-desert country, and that's where the sagebrush flourishes. I don't think one

should assume that, when you see sagebrush, the land has been over-grazed by cattle

I: In 1863 there weren't that many cattle here.

JE: There weren't any cattle around. And who brought the red-topped grass in?

I: Do you recall going from La Grande out toward Hilgard before 1960, when the freeway went in?

JE: I can barely remember where the golf course was, just above the present truck-weighing station. A motel was about where the weigh station is. There was a gas station at Five Points nearby. By the way, professional map makers don't seem to know how to use apostrophes; they have dropped them from every title, and they're also trying to drop any *s* that looks like it might be a possessive. They now call it Five Point Creek, but it was always Five Points Creek. Originally the highway went on the old Oregon Trail highway, up through Hilgard, up the side of the mountain, and came out on top before heading across to Spring Creek. By the time I remember the road, it had been changed so that it ran roughly where the freeway goes now.

When they put a highway and then the freeway in, they made a lot of changes at what is now Hilgard Junction, where the Starkey road takes off and where the park is. They completely removed a sizable point of land that the Oregon Trail used to get up on top. So if you use the overpass there, you're about forty feet under the original trail. If

you're up above, at the top of the cliff, you can follow the trail easily.

I don't think they did much else to the river area there. There was always a nice, little spot there with cottonwoods, and that growth is still there. The slope across the river has been planted with pines more recently. That's where the juvenile-correction center is. That area was a flat when I was younger, and that is the point where Stuart, in 1812, remarked about the echo in the canyon. It's not changed any so far as I can tell.

I: The Mt. Emily Company railroad came up along the river there, didn't it?

JE: That's right.

I: I guess the old CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] camp was right in there, too.

JE: It was on the flat just south of the river, across the bridge from Hilgard Park and on the right.

I: So the road came out of Hilgard and



Tourist facility formerly located at Five Points on the present I-84 freeway west of La Grande, ca. 1940

Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

held to the right side of the bank until they got farther up river?

JE: I wasn't quite sure where it went, although I remember that, when they ended the logging railroad operation, they pulled up the tracks. We were going through there one evening at dusk and stopped because one of the Shay engines was sitting there, still with steam up but cooling off; they had been using it during the day obviously. That's the one that survives and is now at Prineville. I saw that the other one

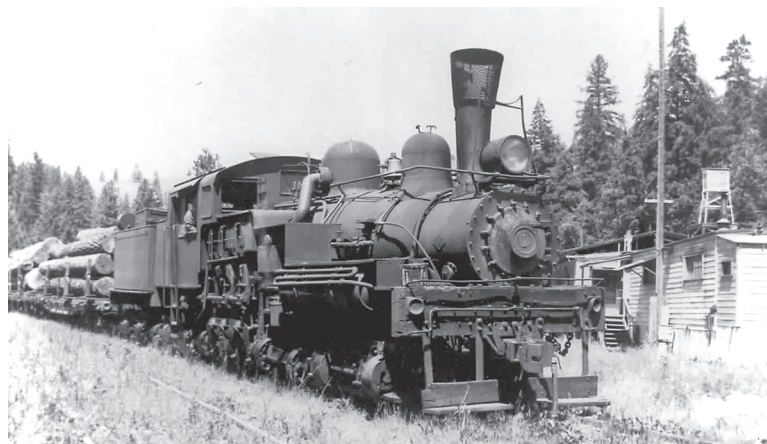
I: What year was that?

JE: It seems to me it was the early 1950s. The one that was saved was offered first to the city of La Grande. The response, as might be expected, was, "What would we want with something like that?" So the lumber company ended up giving it to the Oregon Historical Society, and it sat at Oaks Park in Portland for quite awhile. Then the Oregon Historical Society lent it to the Cass Valley Scenic Railway in

West Virginia and forgot where it was. They forgot they even had it. Not too long ago they suddenly realized to their consternation that they had a locomotive out there somewhere! They got hold of the people in Cass Valley, who had already cannibalized it for parts, but they evidently found parts to put back on it. They sent it out here, and it was soon in good working order. I gather that the people in Prineville are doing scenic tours with that engine.

I: Among other changes, haven't dams played a role?

JE: The Corps of Engineers has always had it in mind to dam every running stream everywhere. Once you get started as specialists, you want to continue your specialty. The Corps for a long time was only interested in building more dams. They keep getting their appropriations that way. I've seen a detailed map of the Northwest that shows every stream with a little blue line across it; the idea was to put in another dam where each pool ends.



Shay engine formerly operated by Mt. Emily Lumber Company in Starkey-Hilgard area, west of La Grande, 1930s

Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

I remember a fellow who was here representing the Corps, checking out the proposed reservoir on Catherine Creek, just above the park [approximately twenty miles east of Union]. I went with him. He wanted to know about any pioneer or other structures that might be there. I pointed out some cabins in the area and said it seemed a real shame to flood a beautiful meadow like that for no other reason than to provide trash fish for people who like to float in boats. He said, "Well, it would help with floods." I said, "I don't think the floods are probably serious enough to warrant the kind of expenditure in tax dollars that you'd be looking at." But, of course, my opinion wouldn't mean anything to him. It was just a chance to say something. I certainly wasn't aggressive towards him; he was a nice guy, doing a careful job, taking pictures. The fortunate thing from my point of view--a selfish one--is that the Indians complained that it was a place where they had camped and fished in the past and they didn't want to see a dam put in there. Their word carried a lot more weight than mine would these days. It seemed to me dreadful to put a dam in there.

I think some of the farmers thought that Catherine Creek dam would be helpful; I'm not sure just why. I wrote a letter to the paper suggesting that we should set our sights a little higher and not be such pikers. We should put a dam three hundred feet high between Pumpkin Ridge [at the north end of the valley] and Mt. Harris; that way we could sell the beach front property in Cove for high prices and give excursions.

The Corps also wanted to put one at a wide meadow near the Grande Ronde River beyond Hilgard. There's a farmhouse there, and the National Guard has a shooting range at the far end of it. They thought it would be a wonderful idea because of all the boating that could be there, close by and handy, but again I didn't really see that would do any good. If we have a really bad year, the dams are not much good for flood control because the pools will be full and run over anyway.

I: One of them, the dam at Perry, when the sawmill was there, broke loose and water took out quite a few buildings at Oro Dell near the mouth of the canyon.

JE: The dams for that kind of operation are usually not intended to be permanent, so they aren't quite as strong as a permanent structure would be.

I: The coming of the railroad, as it did it to so many places in the West, certainly changed the geography, too, didn't it?

JE: Yes, it did. In the 1860s the old road coming down Ladd Hill, which was extremely difficult to come down and even worse to get back up, became a handicap for people living in Union, which started in 1862, a few months after La Grande. Union was, in a sense, better located. In 1864, Jim Pyle laid out his road up what is now called Pyle's Canyon [east of Ladd Canyon]. That was a much easier route even though it was knee-deep or even chin-deep in some places in the spring --still a better road by far.

There is a notice in one of the 1868 newspapers calling for volunteer labor, people from La Grande wanted as volunteers to put a better road up Ladd Hill. La Grande was losing out on a lot of trade because of poor access to the community. So that was done, and I think it helped matters to some extent.

Union, in the 1870s, was pretty much a rival for La Grande and had also become the county seat in the election. People in the Halfway-Richland area, which was in the strip of land that hadn't been taken from Baker County, already had fifty miles to go to get to Union, and they didn't want to go another fifteen to get to La Grande. Cove sided with Union. So Union got the county seat and retained it until 1904.

It bothered La Grande people a little that the business center was in Union. However, when the railroad was com-

ing through, the city fathers in Union were approached by the surveyor; for a little consideration he would locate the railroad through Union. The principal banker, Mr. Eaton, said, "This is a shakedown. We don't need to do this. You're gonna have to come through here anyway." The surveyor said, "Fine" and ran it up the other side of the valley so that Union didn't have access to the railroad after all. They had to put in Union Junction and then build a short line railroad into the town of Union. That handicapped Union's later development. Sometimes these errors that are not seen clearly at the time can cause unfortunate changes in years ahead.

I: Foresight is not always automatic in these cases, is it?

JE: Hindsight is usually at least two-thirds regret.

Appendix

Partial Bibliography of Jack Evans's Publications

Books

Powerful Rocky: The Blue Mountains and the Oregon Trail. La Grande OR: Eastern Oregon College, 1990. 374 pp., illustrations, notes, maps, index.

History of travel from Farewell Bend to the Umatilla River, 1811-1884, including the people and the routes they followed.

Articles and essays on regional history

"Informing a Region: the Newspapers of Union and Wallowa Counties [Oregon]," published in the *La Grande Observer* (special historical section), 1996.

History of all newspapers published in the two-county region, 1868-1996.

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Other

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