

# **BESSIE KNAPP**

**Union County resident for 98 years**

## **AN ORAL HISTORY**



Interview in September, 2002  
at her son's home in Elgin OR

Interviewer: Eugene Smith

**UNION COUNTY, OREGON HISTORY PROJECT**

2004

(revised from 2002)

## **UNION COUNTY, OREGON HISTORY PROJECT**

An Affiliate of the Oregon Historical Society

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

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

### **Purposes**

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

To create a community encyclopedia

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## **Preface**

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

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

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



## About the Interview and This Edited Version

The interview with Bessie Knapp took place in the kitchen of Loyde Knapp (her 81-year-old son) home in Elgin OR. At age 98, she is able to walk unassisted and is mentally alert. Eugene Smith was the interviewer on September 24, 2002.

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

*BK* designates Bessie Knapp's words, *I* the interviewer's.



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I: What is your full name?

BK: Bessie May Knapp.

I: What was your maiden name?

BK: Batchelor.

I: You moved from Cove when you were about two?

BK: I must have been around two.

I: Your earliest memories, then, are probably about La Grande.

BK: Yes.

I: Where in La Grande did you live when you were fairly young?

### **Attending Riveria School**

BK: I went to Riveria School [on north side of railroad tracks, near county fair-grounds].

I: You lived nearby and started first grade there?

BK: Yes.

I: Did that seem like a big school to you?

BK: At that time, yes.

I: Do you remember any of your teachers?

BK: Mrs. McNeil was the principal.

I: Was she a strict teacher?

BK: She would be strict at times if need be. But all teachers and principals have to be.

I: Yes. How did she make children behave or how did she punish them if they didn't behave well?

BK: She hit my hand with a ruler one time. I had muddy shoes on and the kids told



Central School students in 1909. Her future husband, Lowell Knapp, is the boy in the front row, second from the left

Photo courtesy of Bessie Knapp

me to walk on rows of desks. I did because they told me to. I remember that. Mrs. McNeil came in, and she made me wash the desks and wash my shoes off.

I: Did you think it was the right thing to do even though the other kids told you to do that?

BK: Sure it was the right thing for Mrs. McNeil to do to teach me a lesson.

I: I should think so.

BK: We learned the lesson the hard way.

I: Were those desks all fastened together in rows with runners underneath?

BK: I can't even remember that.

I: Most school desks at that time were, so I thought you might remember that. Do you remember anything about learning to read or learning arithmetic?

### **Helping Her Family Members**

BK: Yes. I had a hard time because I was the oldest in the family when I went to Riveria. I had to stay out of school and help mother because she had other children younger than I was.

I: Who was the next oldest?

BK: Thelma Barker. She lives up on Foley [a street in La Grande].

I: By herself?

BK: Yes. She's in lot better health than I am.

I: Other sisters?

BK: One younger sister. We call her the baby now, Gerry Brommel, that lives in Pendleton. She has a son that is probably in his thirties. She lost her husband and she won't live alone; she just won't let Larry loose.

I: Did you have brothers?

BK: Yes. I had Vernon and Floyd. I lost one brother in the war, Woodrow Batchelor. My sons are Loyde [with whom she currently lives]; Charles, whom I lost to cancer (He lived in Kodiak [Alaska] for twenty-odd years.); and Pat, who lives in California. Pat was here just a couple weeks ago. They had a school reunion and of course Johnny Turner and Pat got together. My son Marion lives in La Grande.

I: You said that you had to stay out of school for quite some time.

BK: To help, yes.

I: Helping your mother. Were you helping with cooking and washing clothes, cleaning the house?

BK: Oh, yes, with an old washboard.

I: Did you just go to school for a few weeks or one day or two a week?

BK: When Mother would get too much to do, she would keep me out and I'd help. Sometimes I even had a grandfather on the Batchelor side that would come down and stay with us. We were the ones that had the family. Other family that lived here had just two

daughters. One was Ella Naider, who was a librarian for years in La Grande.

I: Did she ever marry?

BK: In later years, yes. She and I are the same age.

I: Is she still alive?

BK: No, she passed away.

I: Then if you had to stay home and help your mother every once in a while, did that mean you had difficulties in school, keeping up with the other children?

BK: Yes, I had to study to catch up, of course, and had to turn my papers in.

I: Did you keep up pretty well?

BK: I kept up pretty good till I had to stay out too much. But I did pretty well.

I: What did you like about school?

BK: I liked arithmetic pretty well, and I liked our reading books. The first or second reader I think I've got at home [in La Grande]. They just get piled up after several years.

I: Oh, yes. You went through all eight grades at Riveria?

BK: No, no. I quit when I was in the sixth grade because I was baby-sitting everybody. My aunts and uncles and their wives: I would help them. After all, I was already helping at home.

I: So you didn't go back to school after that?

BK: I didn't go to school after that.

I: Do you wish you had?

BK: Well, sure! I really wish I had.

I: But you just didn't have the opportunity?

BK: I didn't have the opportunity to do it.

### **Her Father's Work**

I: What kind of work was your father doing during those early years that you were in school part of the time?

BK: He worked for the railroad until they went out on strike in '22. He went out on strike for higher wages.

I: What was his job with the railroad?

BK: Oiling the wheels and all that.

I: Was he called an oiler?

BK: Yes.

I: Was he working in the La Grande yard?

BK: Yes.

I: Of course these were all steam engines, weren't they?

BK: Yes. There used to be a walkway bridge up over the railroad tracks, and

you could go from the south side of the town to the north.

I: I've heard about that.

BK: But it's been gone for many years now.

I: Would you go over that bridge and then look down to see where he worked?

BK: Oh, yes! Oh yes!

I: Did he talk about his work?

BK: No. He always had something to do. And I think at that time Dad was milking a cow, too.

I: You had a cow near your house?

BK: On the place, yes.

I: You said he went out on strike. Was he a member of the union?

BK: Yes. I don't know whether they called it a union or what. It was just a strike. The rest of them went back, but Dad wouldn't go back.

I: Why?

BK: He said you went out on a strike and he was going to hold to his word. He wasn't going to go back.

I: He really just quit his job then?

BK: Yes, he quit his job.

I: With all those children, where was he going to get money to support you?

BK: We lived up in what they call Old Town now. I was married then--married before I was even seventeen. My dad bought a team, and he and my husband hauled wood. They'd haul up to sixteen-foot lengths of wood on a wagon and in the wintertime on a sled --goat sled. They'd bring it down and a Mr. French, that had a buzz saw, cut the wood in twelve-, fourteen-, or six-



Pedestrian bridge over Union Pacific tracks in La Grande  
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

teen-inch lengths--whatever the person wanted.

I: This was entirely for firewood?

BK: Yes.

I: Did most people burn wood for heat?

BK: Yes. A cook stove would heat, too.

I: Could they make a living out of delivering wood?

BK: They would sell that load of wood for \$3.00 a cord.

I: Did he and your husband go out in the woods and cut trees down?

BK: Oh, yes. They went up south of La Grande. They hauled slab wood one time. I remember that. There was a mill up there [on Glass Hill beyond Mill Canyon]. They just gave them the slab wood, of course. They didn't have anything to do with it up there.

I: The slab wood was the outer part of the log?

BK: Yes.

I: They'd run it through the saw and then you'd have sort of a rounded piece with a flat side?

BK: Yes.

I: Was the slab wood what they cut up for firewood?

BK: Yes. Lowell cut anything they could get that was dry.

I: But they didn't have to pay for the slab wood?

BK: No. You could just pull up there and get it. Now you can't do it; you have to have a permit to go and load it.

I: Do you remember seeing that mill?

BK: The schoolhouse is still up there on that prairie where the mill was. Oh, what do they call that? Come on, brain! [see Glass Hill School below] Let's see, there's a schoolhouse, I believe, if it hasn't been torn down in the last couple years. That schoolhouse still stands.

I: I wondered about the mill. Did you see it?

BK: No. I never went up.

### **Too Much Baby-sitting**

I: You said you married before you were seventeen.

BK: Yes.



Abandoned Glass Hill School, 1999  
Photo courtesy of G & D Fleshman Collection

I:	Why so young?	I:	You had a Model-T?
BK:	To keep from baby-sitting for somebody else.	BK:	Yes.
I:	Tell me more about that. Were you tired of baby-sitting?	I:	Were you able to drive yourself?
BK:	Well, sure. I baby-sat at home and my aunts would ask me to come and work for them. I was just a kid; I'd go and work for them. I also worked for a man in Cove; Uncle Dan Peterman is the only name I can think of right off the top of my head. I'd go over there, and I'd have a lot more work to do when I went home.	BK:	No, I didn't.
I:	Would you stay over there for a few days?	I:	Who took you?
BK:	Oh, yes! I know I stayed over a week because I made the boys sit on a chair in the kitchen because they came along and put their dirty hands in the dough. (We had a bread mixer.) Uncle Dan came in and said, "What are boys sitting there for?" I said, "Because I set them there." He said to them, "Get out. Go outside and play." I said, "If they get out, I'm going to walk to La Grande [about fifteen miles]." He made them sit there.	BK:	Uncle Dan came and got me. Of course, I always walked. I walked from where I live now on C Avenue [She lived there until recently.] down to the old post office and walked back. Maybe push a baby buggy, I don't know. I don't remember.
I:	Were you afraid that they wouldn't obey you if he let them go out?	I:	When you went on these baby-sitting jobs, did they pay you?
BK:	Sure, they wouldn't obey me.	BK:	Oh, no.
I:	I suppose you went on a horse and buggy between La Grande and Cove.	I:	You were supposed to do it just because you were a member of the family?
BK:	An old Model-T.	BK:	Yes. I was supposed to help out.
		I:	I can imagine why you might get tired of that.
		BK:	Yes!
		I:	Your family didn't have much money.
		BK:	No.
		I:	Were you wanting to buy better clothes maybe?
		BK:	Mother did an awful lot of sewing, and I did, too, after I got married. I made



all my own clothes and the boys' own clothes. I had a sister-in-law that lived in Wallace, Idaho and owned a cleaner [a dry cleaning store]. She sent me all the pants and all the shirts that weren't called for, and I made the boys' clothes. So we did pretty well. But we didn't have very much money.

I: Sometimes, were you able to buy material so you could make a dress from scratch?

BK: Yes. Sometimes I'd work for a neighbor, doing some little job, and they'd always pay me well, and material wasn't high at that time, either.

I: Where would you buy it?

BK: Like at the Golden Rule.

I: That was on Adams Avenue [in La Grande]?

BK: Yes. I can't remember about Penney's, but I think there was a Montgomery Ward. The rest I don't know.

## Meeting & Marrying Lowell Knapp

I: If you're not embarrassed, how did your husband-to-be propose to you?

BK: When we first met, we just lived a couple blocks apart, and he chased all the boys out of Old Town. He chased them down the street. He didn't want them to come up there and get me. I always befriended somebody that had something wrong with them, you know. Kids would make fun of them and I'd take their place.

I: You mean if they were crippled?

BK: No, they weren't crippled, but boys just picked on each other--bigger ones. I remember Bob ... My gosh, what's his name? They lived a couple blocks from us. Bob was picking on my brother all the time. That was after the bridge was put over. We walked over to Riveria School. I caught him up on top of the bridge, and I gave him a beating, and he went home and told his dad that I beat up on him. So his dad brought Bob over to our place and he said, "What'd Bessie beat Bob for?" And Dad said, "Because he was picking on Vernon. And he was bigger than Vernon and so she just waited for him on top of that bridge." That was before they had that screen along the side of it. I said, "I'll just pick you up and throw you down there." He thought I would because I was big for my age.

I: You said that your future husband chased the other boys away so they wouldn't come after you. Once he got them chased away, what did he say to you about getting married?

BK: After he got them all chased away and



House in Old Town where Lowell Knapp, Bessie's husband, was born  
Photo courtesy of Bessie Knapp

- they wouldn't come, some others came from Island City on horse. Frank-- what is his last name?--used to come up there with the horse and my husband chased him out. After that, he said, "Let's get married." My mother just had a fit. She said, "You're not going to get married." I said, "I might as well be married as taking care of everybody else's kid."
- I: What did she say to that?
- BK: She said, "I don't blame you." Dad didn't want me to get married, of course. Mama said, "You'll be just as well off as you are here at home. All you do is baby-sit for somebody."
- I: Was it common then for young women and young men to get married quite young--when they were sixteen or seventeen?
- BK: Yes. I wasn't even seventeen. Almost. We were married in August, and I'd be seventeen the next May.
- I: Did your parents look around and see other boys and girls sixteen and seventeen year olds getting married?
- BK: Oh, yes. They married younger then.
- I: So you weren't doing anything that was very unusual.
- BK: Oh, no. Didn't make any gossip anyway.
- I: Where did you live after you were married?
- BK: We rented a house up on B Avenue. It was an apartment. The owner built this one, and then he'd build another one and another, and then he'd turn the corner and build another one. We lived in the second one.
- We canned in those years--fruit and vegetables, everything. Of course, I knew it all before I got married because I'd done it.
- I: What was your husband doing? Working for your father at that time?
- BK: No, he had a team of horses and a saddle horse and a cow that they staked down in Old Town.
- I: Tell me his complete name.
- BK: Lowell Wayman Knapp.
- I: Were you happy that first year of marriage?
- BK: Oh, yes.
- I: You didn't have to baby-sit.
- BK: I didn't have to baby-sit anymore.
- I: You just canned and cooked and cleaned house and took care of him?
- Jobs Outside the Home**
- BK: I canned and cooked and cleaned house. And possibly, if I remember right, I'd go and help some people that lived in the apartment once in a while. If they were elderly, I'd go help. But I didn't work out [outside the home]



till later in years. I cooked for Central School [the former elementary school on 4th Street] for about five years. I quit that when they hired WPA [Works Progress Administration, a federal work program of the 1930s] women to do it.

What did I do next? I went over to the hospital and I believe I worked in the laundry--I and an elderly lady, Mrs. Hofmann. We folded the sheets and our hands would just be blistered from sheets coming through the rollers that were so hot. But they were happy years.

I: When you were working for other people, had you had children already?

BK: Yes. I didn't work out till my youngest boy started school. I baked all the rolls and everything for the lunch.

I: At the Central School?

BK: Yes. And soup and dessert and chocolate--always chocolate. Kids like chocolate. You find now that chocolate wasn't good for them.



Former Central School, La Grande at corner of 4th Street and K Avenue

Photo courtesy of Maxine Cook Collection

## Bearing Children

I: How many children did you have?

BK: I had four boys.

I: All born fairly close to each other?

BK: About two years apart.

I: Were they born at Grande Ronde Hospital?

BK: No. The youngest boy was born at home. Dr. Wonderlick came up to the house and took care of me. I lived right across the alley from my mother at that time. I think once I had a lady across the alley from me come and help me, but I'd be up in three or four days, helping myself.

I: Am I correct in thinking that bearing children wasn't difficult for you?

BK: It wasn't for me, no. I guess I saw too much of it. I knew what to expect, I guess.

I: Had you witnessed the birth of other children?

BK: Yes. I saw one sister being born. I've got one that's ninety-four that I told you lives on Foley.

I: And you saw her being born?

BK: I saw her being born. I don't think that I saw any of the rest of them that I remember.

I: For most women, giving birth to a child involves quite a bit of pain.

BK: Oh, yes.

I: Was it painful for you?

BK: It's something you forget and I guess I just forgot.

I: Did you have any anesthetic?

BK: No.

I: How did you get the blankets and the nightgowns and the other clothing you would need for a baby?

BK: Dr. Wonderlick came up to the house and did the last baby I had. I hardly got in bed before he was born. Dr. Wonderlick just came up to the house.

### **Household Work**

I: I was talking about the clothing that you would need for a baby.

BK: Oh, I made it at home.

I: Did you have a sewing machine?

BK: Mother did. When I was at her house, I did quite a bit of sewing and helping her, too.

I: If you had four children, all two years apart, you had a great deal of work to do every day.

BK: Oh, sure. Till the last one started to school, I was busy!

I: Do you remember your mother coming over?

BK: Yes.

I: To do what?

BK: She'd get after me for laying my husband's overalls on a board sidewalk and taking a broom and scrubbing them instead of rubbing them on a washboard.

I: Why did she not like that method of washing?

BK: She said they were too big for me to handle--to wring by hand. They were. They were hard to wring. You can't wring them very dry, and they just hang on the line.

I: When you were preparing food for the young children and for you and your husband, you said you had a lot of canned goods.

BK: Yes.

I: Where else did you get food?

BK: He worked on odd jobs. When he'd haul wood, we'd buy enough groceries to last us through the winter--like four sacks of flour that you'd have to give that much for one sack now. We'd buy bacon and a ham and store in as much food as we could in the summertime. By canning some, we had fruit and vegetables. I was taught that from the beginning.

I: So you didn't go shopping every week?

BK: No. [laughs]

I: Once a year?

BK: No. I'd go probably every two weeks. You'd run out of some little thing like baking powder or soda or something.

I: Had you and your husband bought a car at that time, or did he have a wagon?

BK: No, he had a wagon and a team and a saddle horse.

I: Would you either go that way or walk to go shopping?

BK: I usually walked.

I: What did you carry your groceries back home in?

BK: In the baby buggy, I guess, with the baby. I didn't buy a whole lot that I had to have. But I'd wheel the baby.

### **Going to the Library**

BK: I and a lady friend would go down to the library and get some books, and then we'd stop back in to the library and pick them up and go on home. I walked with that buggy when the streets weren't paved, and it wasn't very good.

I: Most of them weren't paved, were they?

BK: No.

I: Adams Avenue wasn't, was it?

BK: No.

I: But it had boardwalks.

BK: Our house, where my husband's mother lived, had a boardwalk, too. I'm still living there. [She lived there until recently.]

I: You said you stopped to get books. What kinds of books did you enjoy reading then?

BK: Oh, someone would tell us a good book to get and we'd get it.

I: Fiction?

BK: Zane Grey. We read a lot of them. Not very much fiction and not very many love stories.

I: Zane Grey wrote fiction.

BK: Yes.

### **Reading by Lamp Light**

I: What kind of light were you using to read by? Did you have electricity?

BK: No.

I: Kerosene lamps?

BK: We had a kerosene lamp that hung down and one that we set on the table. It wasn't very good light. We never read at night.

I: Daytime reading was best.

BK: Yes.

I: But you didn't have much time for reading in the daytime, did you?

BK: No. I'd pick up the book whenever I'd

get one of the babies to sleep, and I'd sit down. That's where I got my rest.

### Getting News of the World

I: That's good. Were you reading newspapers at that time, like *The Observer*?

BK: No, we didn't take *The Observer*, but my husband's brother, Horace, took the paper. He'd save it and give to us, but we'd use the paper to start the fire with.

I: You didn't read it very thoroughly then?

BK: No.

I: Did you have a radio?

BK: No. We had a phonograph but no radio.

I: Did you know much about what was going on in the world then?

BK: Oh, you'd listen, you know. You'd see a bunch of people standing on the street, and we'd each have something to say. We'd tell each other what was going on in the world. Some of them would read the Portland paper, and some of them would have *The Observer*. We didn't take *The Observer*.

I: Do you remember hearing that the First World War had begun?

BK: Oh, yes. My grandmother and my mother baked little doughnuts about that big around. [gestures]

I: About two inches wide.

BK: We'd go over to the railroad and give them to the soldiers. I remember that in World War I.

I: Were you getting reports of how the war was going?

BK: Yes.

I: Who did you hear that from?

BK: Just neighbors, I guess.

I: People who read the newspaper more than you did?

BK: Yes. More than I had time to read it.

### Family Clothing

I: Can you describe the clothes that you usually wore at the time when your children were very small?

BK: Of course we didn't wear overalls or slacks.

I: For women.

BK: Women just made our own.

I: Describe a dress that you would make, could you?

BK: Some of them we'd make just to the waistline and then maybe gathered or pleated there. They'd come down to the calf of your leg with two pockets because you were always picking up something.

I: A sleeve that came down just between the shoulder and the elbow, right?

BK: Yes.

I: They were sort of loose dresses?

BK: Yes.

I: Were they usually made of a print material?

BK: Yes, usually a print.

I: With a belt?

BK: I don't think we wore a belt too much. We wore what we called a sash. But the waistline was way down here on your hip.

I: Was that just the style?

BK: Just plain and it was just the style at that time.

I: Was it fairly heavy material?

BK: No.

I: How long could you wear a dress before you got it all dirty and had to wash it?

BK: About two or three days.

I: So you had five or six work dresses maybe?

BK: Early in the morning, when you first got up, with so much to do, you just put on a kimono or housecoat or whatever you want to call them.

I: What kinds of shoes did you wear during the day?

BK: Just leather shoes, I guess.

I: Button-up? High tops?

BK: I had two pair that were buttoned up that I kept for good. They were both given to me. My cousin bought them too small and she give them to me.

I: You were lucky.

BK: Yes. So they sat in the clothes closet. I didn't wear them very much. Evidently, I wore a slipper of some kind that you could just slip your foot in.

I: In the wintertime what additional clothing did you have?

BK: We all had winter clothes. I'll say an undergarment that you wore under your dress. We'd make it of all flannel in the wintertime and wear them. In the summertime I remember making them out of flour sacks--bleach a flour sack and make them.

I: A single flour sack wouldn't be big enough, would it? Did you have to sew some together?

BK: No. You'd have to have two of them. You had to bleach the print out of them, of course. I did so many of them.

I: What kind of a heavy coat did you have?

BK: Evidently, just a heavy material coat. I can't even remember.

I: Wool?

BK: Yes, in the wintertime.

I: What sorts of hats?

BK: I think it was attached to your coat and you put over your head.

I: A hood?

BK: Yes.

I: Any fur in it?

BK: No.

I: Too expensive?

BK: Not that I remember.

I: Would that be too expensive for you?

BK: Yes. I couldn't afford that.

### **Church Attendance**

I: Did you go to church during this time?

BK: Yes. When my grandmother and grandfather Batchelor were alive, I'd go to the Salvation Army with them. I had an Uncle Elmo Meteor that went to all the churches because he played the piano or organ or whatever. He was a musician. His daughter and I used to make the rounds. We'd go to Salvation Army first and then we'd go the next one.

I: What sort of a service did they have at the Salvation Army? What did they do?

BK: Real good. I remember giving us a party at Christmastime.

I: I mean for a regular Sunday service.

BK: Oh, just like a Christian.

I: They'd read from the Bible?

BK: Yes.

I: And have a sermon?

BK: Yes.

I: And sing hymns?

BK: Yes.

I: Did you think that you should dress up--have a different kind of dress to go to church?

BK: No, we just wore what we had.

I: Just regular clothes?

BK: Oh, yes.

I: What you'd wear on Wednesday morning you'd wear on Sunday morning?

BK: Oh, sure.

I: Everybody else dressed that way too?

BK: Yes. The boys usually had clean overalls--all of them that would come to church.

I: Did you have a hard time getting the boys to church?

BK: No. Not when they were little. They liked to go because they'd get off with other kids, you know. I suppose tell their stories. I don't know.

### **The Well-to-do in La Grande**

I: Were you aware during these early years when you were living in La Grande that there were some people in La Grande who had quite a bit of money?

BK: Oh, yes. The Foleys and the Bouveys.

I: Stange?

BK: Stanges: that was later years.

I: I was wondering what you thought about people who had quite a bit of money.

BK: Well, we knew that they could afford it and we couldn't, I guess. We just went right along.

I: That's all there is to it?

BK: It's what we had.

I: Did you feel jealous?

BK: No, I didn't, but I have a sister that was jealous. She wanted to have the best of everything. And she usually got it. Other people would give them things that had maybe worn a little bit, and you could cut it down and make a child's outfit. But she wanted to be up with the Stanges.

I: How did she manage to get up there? Did she marry a man who had a lot of money?

BK: No. She married a man that did baking across the tracks where the Salvation Army is now. There was a bakery there, and he got up real early in the morning and started his bread. He made the bread and some other men made doughnuts and maple bars.

I: He didn't make a lot of money at that job, did he?

BK: No. He made a living

I: How did your sister manage to accomplish the things that she wanted--to live like a rich person?

BK: She manipulated everybody.

I: To give her things?

BK: Yes. She'd get the best of everything. With me, I didn't care.

I: You were more modest, apparently.

BK: Yes. I had clothes to go to Sunday School or to church if I went with Grandma and Grandpa.

I: Did you have any other ambitions at that time in your life?

BK: No, I guess I didn't have any.

I: I'm not suggesting you should have. I thought maybe, as you grew older, you might have some other ideas about how you wanted to live your life.

BK: Oh, yes. In later years, of course, my husband worked. He was ... I won't start on another subject here. He worked. He had a team. He hauled wood and plowed gardens and worked



that way and made quite a bit of money with the team.

I: Was he able to fix things?

BK: Oh, yes. He was like my son that I live with here. He can do anything. He's an electrician, really. He likes to do that. But he won't crawl in under the house or in the attic anymore. He's eighty-one, so he has no business up there doing this.

### **Recreation**

I: What were some of the activities that you did for fun or just for recreation?

BK: We'd go to square dances.

I: Where were they held?

BK: They were held in the homes that had a big enough room. You could have them in the homes. We square danced together.

I: When you went to a square dance party, I suppose it was in the evening.

BK: Yes.

I: Was food served?

BK: Oh, yes. We each took some little thing that we had.

I: Like a potluck?

BK: Yes.

I: Would you eat first?

BK: No, I think we danced first.

I: Would there be maybe eight or ten couples?

BK: Oh, yes. The park down by the river: they had a great big living room as big as these [gestures] two rooms--wider, I know. They'd be crowded with couples out there dancing. If you had a baby, you laid it on the table and covered it up and it slept.

I: How long might you dance?

BK: Oh, probably till about 11:00 and you broke up the music.

I: Was liquor sometimes served there?

BK: I think in the earlier years there was moonshine because you could smell it on them when the men come in.

I: Did you taste it?

BK: No. I didn't have any desire.

I: But some of the men would drink it?

BK: Oh, yes. You knew they drank it.

I: Then they'd get pretty rambunctious?



Hofmann dance hall on Morgan Lake Road  
(formerly Mill Canyon Road)

Photo courtesy of G & D Fleshman Collection



BK: Some of the Hofmanns got real, real happy. Mother used to play the organ, chord, with a violin and a guitar, and things like that. She'd chord on the piano, and they'd square dance. We hauled logs for a dance floor where George and Dorothy Fleshman live.

I: On Morgan Lake Road.

BK: Yes. We hauled the logs for Mr. Hofmann and he built that dance hall. I can't remember who tore it down.

I: Were some of the dances you went to at that hall?

BK: Oh, yes.

I: Can you describe it any more?

BK: It was built in a circle.

I: The logs were placed on top of each other, yes.

BK: There were benches so you could sit, and the dancers were out in the center.

I: Did it have a little kitchen or bathrooms?

BK: They must have had a bathroom, but I can't remember.

I: Was that building used for other purposes besides square dancing?

BK: No.

I: Just for dancing?

BK: Just for dancing, yes.

I: Did he charge money to go there?

BK: No. You just took a lunch and maybe drink, like coffee or tea or whatever. And, of course, they had their moonshine.

I: Was there any other kind of recreational activity that you participated in?

## **Baking for Central School & Doing Laundry Work**

BK: No, not too much. When my youngest boy started to school, I started to cook at school. I had WPA women under me. I made all the rolls and all the maple bars and all that. We had dessert, but I'd make the rolls and the bread. I'd bake them at home and then I didn't have to go down until about 10:30. But I had to get them covered up and in the pickup and all down to school. If my husband wasn't home, I'd do that.

And then I went from there to the St. Joseph Hospital and worked with Edith Lovan. Edith was a large woman. She worked in the office at St. Joseph. That's why I worked in the laundry. I



Former St. Joseph's Hospital at corner of  
4th St. and L Ave., 1930s  
(now a county office building)

Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

just quit the laundry. They wouldn't raise the wages or anything. We'd work with sweat running off of us.

I: It's hard work.

BK: Yes, it was hard work pulling on those sheets. They come off hot rollers from here to the double door there. [gestures] Our hands would be burned. We'd fold them and, oh, we'd have stacks of them from the hospital [St. Joseph's Hospital, which no longer exists]. We ate lunch at the hospital for a long time and then finally they quit serving lunches, and you had to take your own. I wanted more money. I said, "We're not getting much." Finally the other women said, "Who's going to tell them?" I said, "I will." I went over and told the sister [Nuns operated the hospital.] and told her, "We're not getting enough money at the laundry. Look at my hands." She took hold of my hands, felt them, and said, "They're even hot now." I said, "I just came from folding sheets." But she said, "We can't give you any more money." So that was it. I just quit.

### **Back to Baby-sitting**

BK: Then Johnny Groupe and his wife, Milodene, wanted to know if I would help. She had one child and was having another one. She said, "Will you come and help us? And can you stay all night?" I said, "I don't know what Lowell will say if I stay away at night." John said, "Ask him." So I told Lowell what a pickle John was in and he said, "You can do it for Johnny and Milodene." From then on I baby-sat for them and the Whittemores and

some people who live out in the valley. What in the heck is her first name? You don't think of people; you just forget.

I: Sure. That's normal. Were you making more money baby-sitting for these people than you were at the laundry?

BK: Oh, yes. I worked for fifty cents an hour.

I: Of course at that time fifty cents was worth quite a bit.

BK: If you worked long enough hours--you work from 8:00 till 4:00--you made pretty good money.

I: What did you do with the money that you were making? Was it going to household expenses?

BK: Just household expenses and clothes for the boys. Of course, as they went up in school, they wanted better clothes, too, so Mama would do without. I had uniforms that I wore at Central School when I was cooking, and I think I wore them when I went over to the laundry. I think I wore my uniforms over there because I had them and there was no use letting them lie around.

### **Belonging to Organizations**

I: Did you have time to be involved with any social clubs or groups?

BK: Yes. I belonged to the Eagles and I belonged to a little neighborhood club. Pollyannas, I think, was the name of it.

I: What did that club do?

BK: We took our mending or crocheting or knitting or whatever we wanted to do. We served a little lunch when they came. Probably six or eight would come. We'd do whatever we wanted to do of our own, even patching.

I: And talking.

BK: Yes, and talking, visiting.

I: Was there a lot of gossip?

BK: Oh, yes. All on the neighborhood.

I: What would you do at an Eagles meeting?

BK: I didn't go to very many of them because I worked and I couldn't stay up nights and get sleep, too. No, I went to one meeting a month at the Eagles.

I: Do you remember what went on at a meeting?

BK: No, not really. I was outside guard for a year. I think I got sick and had to quit so I just quit.

I: What does an outside guard do?

BK: You wouldn't let one in that didn't have a card.

I: You stood at the door and checked people when they were coming in?

BK: If they could show me their card, they could go in. If they couldn't show me the card, they didn't get in. I wouldn't let them in. I've had some of them

mad because they'd leave their purse at home and bring a little night purse, like this, [indicates her own purse] just a little one they could carry in their hands and not leave lying around someplace.

I: And no card. You'd probably recognize most of the people, wouldn't you?

BK: Oh, yes. I knew most of them that would come. Once in a while we'd have somebody new come in. But they still had to have their card from wherever they were from to show you. I don't think they're as trustworthy now as they were then, really.

### **Children's Schooling**

I: When your children were in school, were you aware of what was going on in their classrooms? Did they talk to you about school?

BK: Yes. I went to school one morning when Marion was first in school. I knocked on the door and walked in because at that time I was cooking. I asked Mrs. Ingle why she was letting Marion sleep. She said, "He must not have gotten his sleep or he wouldn't be asleep. You leave him alone." So she wouldn't let me wake him up.

I: Did he do that a lot?

BK: No, I don't think so. Probably several times and he finally just got used to going to school.

I: Mrs. Ingle was a first grade teacher, wasn't she?

BK: Yes. She was principal, too.

I: What do you remember about her?  
Did you know her fairly well?

BK: Oh, yes. She was a very good teacher.

I: Everybody liked her?

BK: Everybody liked her, yes. She let us play out on the playground five minutes longer than we should have.

I: She wasn't your teacher, was she?

BK: No.

I: Maybe you're thinking about Mrs. McNeil at Riveria?

BK: Yes. I had her, too.

I: But Mrs. Ingle taught your children?

BK: Yes. She was a very good teacher. I liked her, and I got along well with all the teachers that my boys went to.

### **A Chinaman Who Raised & Sold Vegetables**

I: One of the things you wrote here [on a piece of paper Bessie wrote before the interview; see appendix] said that a Chinaman had a big garden and sold vegetables from a buggy around town.

BK: Yes, around town.

I: Tell me more about this Chinaman.

BK: He'd been there since I was married.

I: Do you remember his name?

BK: I don't know whether the man had a name or not. Maybe I couldn't have said it if he had told me. He raised a great big garden and put his vegetables in little round baskets like this [gestures] and went up and down the streets. We always went right to his garden, and he'd give us our produce, usually. If he liked us, he'd give it. If he didn't, he'd talk Chinese and, boy, you couldn't understand him!

I: Do you remember what kinds of vegetables he raised?

BK: Just like an ordinary family garden.

I: Any Chinese vegetables?

BK: If he did, he never sold them to you.

I: Just the kinds of vegetables people were used to around here.

BK: Oh, yes.

### **Mother's Arrival in Grande Ronde Valley**

I: You also mentioned something about your mother, who had asthma, and came from Pasco on a stagecoach to Elgin.

BK: Yes.

I: Were these stories that you heard?  
How did you know about them?

BK: I don't know. My grandmother Bachelor said her doctor sent her out west

because she had asthma so bad that they didn't know what to do with it. They said, "Come out to a drier country." They come from Michigan. They come on the train to Pasco and from Pasco to Elgin and from Elgin to Cove--still on the stage, of course. I was born there, so we must have stayed there two years, maybe. Then we moved to La Grande, and Dad worked for different farmers because that's what he'd done when he was in Michigan. He was a farm boy.

### **Rebuilding An Old House in La Grande**

I: We haven't talked very much about the house that you still own on C Avenue. You must have spent quite a number of years there.

BK: Yes. It used to be, they said, an undertaking parlor, a grocery store, and a tinsmith. My son found a lot of the tin when he was working on the sewer pipes as we were rebuilding the house. We tore the old house down and rebuilt. On the inside of that house there



House in La Grande rebuilt by Lowell Knapp  
Photo by Eugene Smith in 2002

was siding just like it was on the outside---no paper, no nothing. We had a lot of lumber that was already painted, but, of course, through the years, if you use it on the outside, the paint wouldn't stick to it. So my husband made shakes for it and put those on. And that's what it has on the outside now.

I: When you rebuilt the house, did you have indoor plumbing and electricity?

BK: When we tore the house down, we piled up the lumber that we could save. It had twelve- by twelve-foot timbers for a foundation. They're still in there. We just built on top of them. We had outside hydrants and things like that, but I didn't have a washer or dryer for a long time. Finally, I got a washer. We installed an inside bathroom in 1945.

I: As people's lives changed, they got more and more appliances and luxurious things. Did you find your attitude adjusting to all those things easily?

BK: Yes, because we just built up to it. We really enjoyed it because we built the garage when we got the house and tore it down. Then we all moved into the garage. We had three beds and I bought a Sears sink; it had drawers in it and it's white metal. Finally, I bought the rest of the cupboards and that's what's there now.

I: When did your husband die?

BK: He died in '73.

I: From an illness?

## **Observations of Smoking & Drinking**

- BK: I told him it was from smoking, but he had an easy death. I was always afraid he'd smoke a cigarette and set something a-fire. He could sit down in a chair and go to sleep real easily. I listened to him because I slept in the other bedroom then. I couldn't sleep with him because he was always hitting me; he didn't mean to, but it was reflexes, I guess.
- I: Had he always been a smoker?
- BK: Yes. If he didn't smoke, he chewed. One was as bad as the other.
- I: Do you have an idea of why he started smoking and chewing?
- BK: No. He was so young; maybe he followed the elderly men who worked where he was working.
- I: Were they all men?
- BK: Yes, I suppose. He smoked a corncob pipe.
- I: When you went downtown in La Grande, do you remember seeing saloons?
- BK: Yes. I knew there was one on Jefferson. We never went back there.
- I: Why?
- BK: We were afraid of them, I guess.
- I: Did you think that they were going to hurt you?

- BK: I don't know what we thought. I know we were told to stay away from that street by our parents and grandparents. They said, "Don't you go down there, now."

## **Seeing Black People in La Grande**

- I: Did you know some black people?
- BK: No. I never knew any black people. My dad did when he worked for the railroad because they were porters on the railroad.
- I: There were also a number of black people living in La Grande.
- BK: Not too many.
- I: You didn't see them?
- BK: No.
- I: Do you think they kept to themselves?
- BK: Negroes would bring whiskey from Canada and give it to the car men who were working on the railroad cars, seeing that the brakes were all good before they went over to Boise. They'd pass it along to them and they'd sell it.
- I: How did they get it from Canada?
- BK: I don't know whether Canada just let them have it or not. They wore bib overalls, and they had a pocket down the inside where they probably put at least three bottles. I know Dad said one man could carry out three or four bottles.
- I: Did you think that they were doing that so they could make a little money?



BK: I don't know what they thought. I don't think my dad had too much to do with it because he didn't say anything. He just said, "This man got his whiskey again last night." If he was on night shift, he'd know a bit more.

I: What were you thinking then about black people in relation to white people?

BK: I didn't like them.

I: Do you know why?

BK: They never did anything to me, but I just didn't.

I: Is it because of what other people said about them?

BK: No, I don't think so. I remember a neighbor, my granddaughter's son, had a Negro family move in across the street from them, and my grandson thought, "Oh, I'm gonna have somebody to play with now." A little black boy come out, and he ran over to his Mother and said, "Mama, that boy's black. Will it rub off?" I guess she told him no, that didn't rub off.

I: Did he make friends with the black boy then?

BK: Oh, yes. I guess he did.

I: But you said earlier that you thought you didn't like black people.

BK: I didn't. I had never seen enough of them. I didn't get down around the railroad where I'd see them. My dad and Ed Allen both said that the Negroes would get in a box car and ride.

I: White people did that, too. You didn't know any black people. All you knew were white people?

### **Working at China Mary's Restaurant**

BK: I knew the Chinese because I worked in the Chinese restaurant for a while.

I: Was that China Mary's?

BK: China Mary's, yes.

I: What did you do?

BK: I waited tables there for about a year or a year and a half. I knew both Mary and her husband, Wong.

I: Tell me about Mary--what kind of person she was.

BK: Oh, she was good to me. I liked her. I wanted to make that egg dish that you whip them together and you put the egg on the iron skillet, about this big around, [gestures] and let that cook. When it's cooked, you put it on a hardwood bowl maybe. You make a



Interior of China Mary's restaurant  
(China Mary at center), 1930s  
Photo courtesy of Betty Wallace Ethel

whole stack of them, and then you cut the eggs this way and put strips of eggs on top of your noodles. She taught me that. She taught me how to cut the onions up real fine--to slice them and then chop them. So I learned a lot from her.

I: They had that restaurant for a number of years here, didn't they?

BK: Oh, yes.

I: And a lot of customers.

BK: Yes. Their restaurant was on Adams Avenue.

I: When you said that she was good to you, you mean by teaching you how to cook certain things?

BK: Yes.

I: What other things did she do for you?

BK: Every once in a while she'd find something that she wanted to give me, even if it was just a scrap of a material because she knew I made quilts. If it

was just a little scrap she knew I could use, she'd get them. That's in one of the boys' quilts.

I: Were you working there after you were married?

BK: Yes, I had to be.

I: When you wanted to get a job, like at Central School or St. Joseph's Hospital or China Mary's, how did you present yourself?

BK: Well, I guess through the principal at Central. I'm sure that he told them I was good cook and told China Mary I was a good cook.

I: Did you hear that there was a job available and then go up and say "I'd like to have that job?"

BK: Yes, I guess I did. Anyway, I got it. She liked me real well. And I liked her. Wong passed away before she did. She finally married a white man and they were either at Milton-Free-water [about seventy miles northwest of La Grande] or Walla Walla [in Washington, about ten miles north of Milton-Freewater], I don't know which.

## Making Quilts

I: You said you did quilting.

BK: Yes. I don't quilt, I tie. I tie it on the backside. I turn this [piece of fabric] over to the wrong side, and I'd tie it. My pieces were cut any shape that'd fit in with the piece that I had put in before. Then I'd find a piece that would go there. When I got the top made,



Location of China Mary's restaurant--upstairs of building at right, Safeway below (all three buildings now demolished)

Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens



I put the cotton in or else an almost worn out sheet blanket; that makes a good lining. Then I'd turn it upside-down, the bottom showing, and then I'd tie it about every two inches.

I: Why did you use that method?

BK: It used up old pieces of material.

I: I mean particularly the tying.

BK: I couldn't quilt--take all those little stitches--because I can't use a thimble. I just had to learn myself how to do it.

I: Was a needle involved at all?

BK: Oh, yes. I don't think I've got any tied with yarn.

I: Why can't you use a thimble?

BK: I couldn't use a thimble for some reason. I never could. I never did at all. I used to have a finger that was sore all the time because I'd try to push that needle through.

I: Do you mean you couldn't find a thimble that would fit your finger?

BK: No. I've got all kinds of good ones.

I: But for some reason it wouldn't stay on your finger?

BK: I just didn't like it. I could do better with just my hand.

I: It sounds as though you endured a lot of pain.

BK: Yes.

I: Do you still have any of the quilts?

BK: Yes. I've got a quilt at home now for my last great-grandson. I've got it made and it's up at the house in La Grande. I didn't bring it down when I came to Elgin the other day. To top it all off, I fell the other day in my home. And Loyde was mad.

Appendix  
Bessie's Handwritten notes

As near as I remember, hearing  
my folks talk. The Batchelor moved to Oregon  
in the early 1800s. Grandma Batchelor Butler  
told her to come west. She had asthma. They came  
to Rose. At the stage coach to Elgin. Later to Rose  
where I was born. From there to San Leandro.  
My father worked for farmers. Then to  
the Rail Road. Till there was a strike at R.R.  
He went out with the older men. He would not  
go back. This was some time in the twenties.  
He said I have worked with my three sons.  
Told me that in 16 foot. A Mr French sent it up  
to fit more 12 & 14 in to fit their stove. Mr French  
lived on E Ave. I know the Goodrich family by this  
line. My folks brought the Goodrich from a black  
neighborhood called Brighton. Mr. They returned along the  
Elgin where was working at the library from  
high school till her death in 1977.

I remember my father married in 1918 on  
Aug 29. 1921 Lloyd Wayman was born. Two years  
apart Charles Ray, Elmer Barton, after after his  
name Batchelor

Who now lives in Pasadena California. My  
father (Pat) died in the 1940s. Was

I remember the Turnbours. I am sure among  
if I remember right in 1922

Knew the Loran for a long time. He knew  
my folks in Rose Oregon.

Remembered the Goodrich moved from Rose  
to Union. Mrs Russell. Knew the Connors  
Tabbott. Peter. Mrs William. King. Peter, Jewell  
Spear Montgomery, Harry Baker. Back  
in the early days.

On Rose a chimney had a  
Big garden on Can. Sold vegetables from  
a buggy along town.

continued on p. 27

I went to Riverview School when I was 9 or 10 years old. Couldn't go to the school reunion in 1982!?

I'd hate to see it torn down. Hate to see the old building down. (I and the old Coast home was the same age.) I hear the old Safeway is going to be torn down. My wish is they leave some of our old buildings.

No old building to remember. Our old rail road building are all gone.

I did get to watch the new Safeway, from hustling cement away and pouring the floors.

Let me let you ask the questions?



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