WILLIAM LOVAN

Union County resident for 76 years

AN ORAL HISTORY

Interviews in February & September, 2003
at his home in La Grande OR

Interviewer: Eugene Smith

UNION COUNTY, OREGON HISTORY PROJECT
2004
(revised from 2003)

UNION COUNTY, OREGON HISTORY PROJECT
An Affiliate of the Oregon Historical Society

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

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

Purposes

To record & publish oral histories of long-time Union County residents
&
To create a community encyclopedia

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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 William Lovan took place at his home in La Grande. At age 76, Bill is physically vigorous and alert mentally.

The interviewer was Eugene Smith, Executive Director of the Union County, Oregon History Project. He completed the one-and-a-half-hour interview on February 8, 2003 and a one-half-hour interview on September 19,2003.

Heather Filling'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.

WL designates Wiliam Lovan's words, *I* the interviewer's.

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Immigrating to Union County

I: When were you born?

WL: I was born in 1927.

I: When did your father come to Union County?

WL: My grandfather. Henry Lovan, came from Illinois with his wife, Malinda, and family. They had three sons, Oren —my dad—and Omar, who were twins, and Orlie, the youngest. The twins were born in Illinois in 1889, but Orlie was born in 1893 in Oregon, so they would have come west some time between 1889 and 1893. Dad would have been two or three years old.

They settled in around the town of Cove—a good two miles from the town of Cove to where the old Lovan ranch was. I can remember being out there maybe one time when I was three or four years old. I don't recollect anything except being there for a big family gathering. Dad used to tell us that, when they come to the Grande Ronde Valley, it was full of water. You had to come over to Union and then around the Foothill Road to get to La Grande. Island City was an island.

My dad married Rosa Hofmann in 1919. Her family had come from Switzerland in 1906, stopping in Utah and Idaho before coming to La Grande in 1911.

I: Why did they come from Ellis Island to the Grande Ronde Valley?

WL: I have no idea.

I: He left no records for why they made that choice?

WL: Back then people didn't pay any attention to keeping records.

I: Did they have very much money?

WL: They had to have a little money to get to Ellis Island.

I: It would seem so.

WL: Grandpa Hofmann was a watchmaker in Switzerland.

I: Did he do watchmaking once he got here?

WL: No.

Bill's Father

I: Could you tell about what kind of a man your father was—some of his characteristics ?

WL: He was a hard worker. Of course, in those days nobody knew anything but hard work. He was a good family man, providing for his family. He didn't go to church. He wasn't much of a church person.

I: How tall was he? About your height?

WL: About my height—not a big man, but he probably weighed 180 pounds and was about 5'6".

I: How far did he get in school?

WL: I couldn't tell you.

I: He didn't talk about it?

WL: No. Years ago people didn't talk about that stuff.

I: Could your father read?

WL: Yes. He read the newspaper like everybody else. Other than that he didn't do a lot of book reading.

I: Did he have a beard?

WL: No. He kept clean-shaven all the time.

I: How do you think he shaved?

WL: He had a little razor with a blade that he'd use on one side and then turn over.

I: It was probably one of the first safety razors. How did he dress? Overalls and a blue shirt all the lime?

WL: That's right. He also wore an old hat all the time. He was quite a man.They broke the mold after him.

The Hofmann Dairy

I: What did Grandfather Hofmann do to earn a living?

WL: He ran a dairy. My dad finished the dairy, and we moved up there for two or three years, I was about three years old when we moved up on Grandpa Hofmann's place. Dad ran the dairy until it was closed.

Dad met my mother somewhere along the line. They married and lived up by Morgan Lake. My dad hauled wood downtown to buy groceries or whatever they needed. A lot did barter work.

I: Do you know if he built the house they lived in near Morgan Lake?

WL: Somebody had built it before. It was the old Priest place.

I: Were they renting a place, do you think?

WL: I doubt there was much renting going on then.

I: Working for the owner?

WL: Working for the owner or something like that, yes. My two sisters and brother were born up there. My sister and one brother were twins, as Dad was a twin. My oldest daughter had a set of twins, and my first grandson had a set of twins. Twins have stayed in the Lovan family.

I: Is the barn still there?

WL: Yes. At the foot of the place, there was a garage, and there was a chickcn house out on the hill by the barn.

I: The land near the Hofmann dairy doesn't look as though it had the best kind of grazing. Did the cows just go wandering up the hill?

WL: Yes. Grandpa had all the land above the Fleshmans [George and Dorothy

Bill Lovan in 1927, the year of his birth
Photo courtesy of G&D Fleshman collection

Fleshman, who presently occupy the former Hofmann property on Morgan Lake Road] clear back to Waterhouse Hill; that was all grazing for the cows. He had to buy hay in the summertime; I don't remember their raising hay there.

I: Wasn't that a difficult place to have cows and a dairy than down on the flat land in the valley?

WL: Yes, it was because in the wintertime we couldn't get in and out. We used to have tough winters. They had a wagon drawn by a horse.

I: Why did he choose that place for a dairy?

WL: I do not know why he did that.

I: Had he ever farmed before?

WL: I don't know. After he quit the dairy, he got the idea to build a store on 4th Street. When they moved into the store, we moved up on the hill to take care of their dairy until it ran out.

I: When did the dairy run out?

WL: We moved down here [to what was then Old Town La Grande] in 1933, so that was the end of the dairy. It wasn't Hofmann's anymore; it was Lovan's Dairy.

I: Do you recall your father saying that he just wasn't able to make enough money out of it, or was it too hard?

WL: I believe it was probably too much work for him. Grandpa had sons to help him, and Dad had my brother and me, but I was just a little punk then and couldn't do much. I believe he was probably tired of it and wanted to get down off the hill to get a little bit better life.

Rosa and Oren Lovan,
Bill's parents, ca. 1939
Photo courtesy of G & D Fleshman Collection

At Hofmann homestead, Mill Canyon Road
back row: Margaret Bruce Lovan (wife of Omar), Malinda Redman Lovan (mother of Oren & Malinda Redman Lovan), Omar Lovan, Henry Lovan (father of Oren & Omar), Rosa Hofmann Lovan (mother of Edith, Earl, Merle, & Bill), Edith, twin Merle, Oren Lovan (father of Edith, Earl, Merle, & Bill)
front row: twin Earl Lovan, Bill Lovan, ca. 1930
Photo courtesy of G & D Fleshman Collection

Dance Hall Days

I: I've heard there was a dance hall near the Hofmann/Lovan dairy. Who do you think built it?

WL: My grandfather, Fritz Hofmann.

I: Did he build it as a dance hall?

WL: Yes, he did. It was round. This was right along or right after Prohibition days. Booze was flowing like mad—someone made a still up above the dairy. Every Saturday night my dad and mother had a dance there. Mom played the piano. Dad the banjo and mouth harp. One night I got up out of bed, scared for some reason, and walked up to the dance hall. The roof was just going up and down! They were having a gay time.

I: Were your parents doing this to earn money?

WL: They did raise a little money, but they also did it so that people would have something to do. At midnight Mom made sandwiches and coffee.

I: Did the men take a few side trips to the still?

Hofmann dance hall on Mill Canyon Road, 1924 (later demolished)
Photo courtesy of G&D Fleshman collection

WL: Probably. There was a road farther up what is now Morgan Lake road that cuts off to the left; we used to call that the old bear trail. That was the old road up to Glass Hill before the new one was built. On up there, probably a good mile from the Fleshmans, there was a big hole in the ground and bottles scattered all over. There had to be a still there of some kind. I'm sure there was a lot of that going on.

I: Do you remember seeing any fights?

WL: No, I don't remember seeing anything.

I: How did people get up there?

WL: They had cars, though there wasn't much parking space there. On Sunday I walked up there and saw cars backed over the bank; somebody had to pull them out.

The Old Lovan House

WL: When Dad quit the dairy, we moved to an old house on the site where my wife and I currently live. It had no lights and no water. We had to pack water from the old courthouse across the street—summertime and winter time. We had to keep the old boiler that Mom had on the stove full for baths, dishes, and mopping floors. We took two baths a week on Thursday and Sunday. It was probably another two years before we got water to the house—just one pipe of water to the house.

I: Who took a bath first?

WL: I believe that I took the first bath; then the rest of them followed me. I'm the baby. Then my older brother and two sisters.

I: All using the same water?

WL: You better believe it.

I: Do you know when that house had been built?

WL: It was built and went on the tax roll in 1895. We could've kept it as a historical place, but, after my folks passed away, I didn't want college kids in front of me. [The first house was on the front of the lot occupied by the present Lovan house on B Avenue.] Dad deeded me this property back here [to the rear], so we tore the old place down. My sister lives next to me.

When I was a child, we packed two or three coal-oil lamps from room to room. In the wintertime we heated up flat irons to take to bed with us, wrapped in paper. My two sisters, my brother and I slept in one big bedroom downstairs—two in one comer and two in the other. Mom and Dad had another room. Times were tough in the 1930s; we were poor. Nobody had any money.

I: What was your father doing?

WL: Dad was sick quite a bit after World War I. He spent a lot of time in the Veterans' Hospital in Walla Walla.

I: Was he disabled in the war?

WL: Probably some of his sickness was from the war, but I think a lot of it was from something else. He finally got back on his feet, and we started raising a few chickens for our own use. Over in front of the old courthouse, he planted a garden, and across the creek was another plot he planted all in potatoes. We had lots of vegetables, and Mom canned every year.

I: Did he own the land?

Parents' Work

WL: No, he rented it from Russell, who lived in the old courthouse. When we moved here, the courthouse was downtown [on K Street].

I: Had a family moved into the old courthouse building?

WL: Right. It was the L. H. Russell place. They let Dad use it, and they got some of the vegetables he grew. He got a cow, and we had a calf every year from the cow. We had pigs now and then that we raised for food in the wintertime.

Mom got work in the greenhouse nearby [belonging to the Rohans], and she made about $1.00 a day, which was pretty good bucks then.

I: What was she doing?

WL: Mixing bull manure, doing everything around the greenhouse, planting flowers and tomatoes. Around Decoration Day they sold a lot of flower boxes for cemetery decoration.

Getting Box Wood at the Mill

WL: And, of course, wood was a big project then. People had to have wood in the wintertime because there was no other kind of heat.

I: Where were you getting the wood?

WL: We had to buy it. The Harris brothers--Tom, Bill and Sam--lived on Glass Hill at Blizzard Flat, past Morgan Lake about four miles. They had three cabins so they could each live in one cabin. They cut cord wood and hauled it downtown for sale. Mom started buying two

or three cords of that, and my brother and I had the old buck to put pieces of wood on. We had to cut some of that wood every morning before we went to school. Then the Mt. Emily Mill in La Grande started having box wood for sale, and Mom started buying that.

I: What is box wood?

WL: Box wood came from the planer; the other wood was called mill wood and came right out of the mill--the ends cut off boards. They backed a truck up under a chute that was dropped into the truck and hauled a half a cord at the most. It was around $7.00 a load. My grandparents lived across the street and got wood, too, like everybody else. That's the way life went as we grew up.

I: When the truck came and dumped the load of wood, was it your job to stack it, or did you have to cut it more?

WL: No. It was all cut up in about sixteen-inch blocks. It was my job to stack it. I got the job all the time, but that was no big deal.

I: Did your parents and grandparents heat the houses with just one stove?

WL: One stove in the house was all. The house we had wasn't very big until Dad got back on his feet and started building onto it. He built a bathroom onto it when we got water.

Well Water and City Water Supply

WL: We had two wells here when we moved. Dad filled one well up with junk for some unknown reason.

I: Do you know how deep you had to dig the well?

WL: The well next door was about twenty feet deep. When they finally got rid of it, my brother-in-law pulled the pipe out; it was a good twenty feet.

I: Was it hand dug?

WL: I'm sure it was.

I: Was it lined with any kind of brick or other material?

WL: We couldn't tell.

I: Would the method then have been to hand dig it, put a pipe down, and then fill in around the pipe?

WL: I think that was probably the way it was done.

I: With a pump on it?

WL: Yes. The pump was in the old house--a hand pump like we see in old movies.

I: I've often seen the pump outside but not in the house.

WL: This was in the house, right next to a sink or a tub.

I: Was it good water?

WL: Yes. It was good water, you bet.

I: Could you get it all year long?

WL: Yes. It was there all year long.

I: He must have tapped into an aquifer.

WL: It could have been. We get a lot of drainage off this hill, so I imagine there was probably a lot of water from that. We finally got city water when we were on our feet financially.

I: Was the city water better?

WL: No.

I: Where was the city getting water?

WL: From the old Beaver Intake.

I: Where's the Beaver Intake?

WL: It's probably thirty miles southwest of La Grande.

I: Does that come from a reservoir?

WL: Yes. It was built umpteen years ago out of wooden pipe that had the steel wrapped around to hold the boards together. We used to have ice cold water here all the time when we had the Beaver Intake--good water. Then they started using wells out in the valley and adding chlorine and other stuff to it. I just don't go for it; it just doesn't suit me. I realize it would have cost a lot of money to update the Beaver Intake, but we've spent a lot of money on the wells. In the summertime the water I get out of the faucet is so bad I can barely drink it. The quality of water is no good.

I: Tell me a little more from what you know about the La Grande Reservoir. Is that what they called it?

WL: The water from the Beaver Intake used to dump into the old reservoir--a pretty good-sized reservoir. It's in La Grande and comes out at the top of 2nd Street. Then they built another one and roofed both of them. We used to have really good water--the best water in the county.

I: Maybe the supply from the reservoir wasn't enough for the number of people here?

WL: I don't believe that. We had plenty of water.

The Old Neighborhood

I: Describe how Old Town looked when you were a boy.

WL: We had houses here behind us that looked like ours. The old stagecoach barn had an old stagecoach in it when I was seven years old. There was another big building that had a big sign on it, "Dry Goods." This had been the main part of the town.

I: Did you call it Old Town then?

WL: You bet we did!

I: When was the new part of La Grande constructed?

WL: I don't believe anything was there until the railroad came in 1884.

I: Give me as much detail as you can about Old Town--the kinds of activities you observed going on around here.

WL: I don't believe that there was really much activity going on because we were just young kids going to school and getting in all the mischief we could. I've heard a lot of stories from some of the boys, Ed Taylor and some of the Knapps. I suppose my older brother was in on some of it. My mother kept a pretty good rein on us kids. She did all the straightening out. Dad didn't monkey with us. What Mom said we'd better do.

I: Did you have any sense when you were growing up that Old Town was where La Grande really began?

WL: No, we never paid a bit of attention to it.

I: Were you aware that people following the Oregon Trail had gone through here?

WL: Yes, we knew that.

I: How did you know that?

WL: Number one, there was a monument up on the hill. When we were kids, we played on that hill everywhere. There were still tracks going up that hill behind Table Mountain. But we weren't paying any attention to that. This road out in front of the house was on the route the wagon trains took. They had to make the comer where the greenhouse was and go up here on up to the flats where Dad had cows; that's where they rested for three or four days before they went up over the hill toward Hilgard.

Poor without Feeling Poor

I: You said "we were poor," but did you really feel poor?

WL: No.

I: Why?

WL: We had plenty of food.

I: What did you do for clothing?

WL: We got clothes from the WPA [i.e., Works Progress Administration]. I remember wearing overalls to school that we got from somewhere, and we used to get a little food from them also. Whether it was the WPA or what, I don't remember, but we did get food.

I: Was it from a charitable organization?

WL: No, it was from the government. Dad finally got a job with Union County for $100 a month. Boy, we were really living then! Every payday we went downtown, and Mom took us all out to eat. There was a little place called the Shake Switch Shop--across the alley from where the former Zimmerman store is now [Adams and Elm], Once a month we would get a hamburger and a milkshake for twenty-five cents.

I: This was your treat?

WL: This was our treat. Yes, sir.

I: What else did you spend all this lavish money on?

WL: We didn't have any furniture. Dad had no car. We walked everywhere we went. Finally, Dad got a '34 Chevrolet and then traded it in on a '37 Plymouth. Eventually, we went to a '41 Nash.

I: All of these were used cars?

WL: All used cars. Nobody could afford a new car.

I: Why did he think that the family needed a car? Was your life very much different from what it had been when you were walking everywhere?

WL: No, it wasn't any different, but it was just the idea you had wheels to go somewhere and do something.

I: Did that make you feel as though you were more important?

WL: Yes. It made us feel like we were living maybe a little bit better off.

I: Was that an aim people had? They didn't like not having very many things?

WL: Yes. Everybody tried to better themselves. That's the way the human is, isn't it?

I: Do you think that your father was influenced by any kind of advertising?

WL: No. I don't think so.

I: Advertising is one of the main ways to make people think that they need something that they didn't know they needed before.

Max Turn's Secondhand Furniture

WL: My sisters and brother worked and started buying furniture for my folks--an old davenport. They bought it at Turn's Secondhand Furniture--Max Turn--on Depot Street. My brother and sister bought quite a bit of furniture for Mom and Dad from old Max Turn.

We also collected bottles or whatever we could, went down there on Saturday, and turned these bottles into Max Turn for cash.

I: What did he do with them?

WL: I think he probably used them for kerosene; people came in to buy kerosene, and he used these bottles for that.

I: It sounds like a salvage shop.

WL: Yes. That's about what it was besides the furniture. Eventually Warner Hildbrandt went to work for him and later got into Zimmerman's through Max Turn. Warner Hildebrandt was related to me some way. I'm probably related to about everybody in town.

Going to School

I: You went to Central School [in a building that was demolished and replaced by the present La Grande Middle School], didn't you?

WL: I went there all through eight grades.

I: Do you have any specific memories of how kids behaved or how the teachers reacted toward you?

WL: It seemed to me that all the kids got along well. Once in a while, some guy beat another boy up for this or that, but I saw only one fight that I can remember in high school. The teachers were good except in the fifth grade; we had a teacher named Mrs. Brown, who, if she caught anyone chewing gum or eating candy in class, bring that person in front of the class. She had a thick ruler about fifteen inches long that she used to pop that unlucky kid three times in the palm of the outstretched hand. I never did get it, but I couldn't afford the gum to chew. That would teach us not to chew gum in her class.

I: Did the teachers do the same thing if kids talked when they weren't supposed to?

WL: No, they told us to hush. That was the only bad thing I can remember. I don't know what the big deal was.

In the fourth grade the teacher was Mrs. Mahaffey. Sometime along the line she had gone with my dad, so she thought I was an OK guy. I could carry a pretty

Central School in La Grande (now demolished) at corner of 4th Street & K Avenue--first used as La Grande High School
Photo courtesy of Maxine Cook collection

good tune, so she made me get up in front of the class and lead the class in singing. I didn't care for that at all.

I: Do you remember knowing about the laboratory school on campus?

WL: Yes.

I: Did kids like you have any particular attitude about the kids who went to Ackerman?

WL: We thought it was just the high mucky-mucks that went over there.

I: They were somehow superior?

WL: That's what we figured. They were the rich people, and the rest of us were poor people.

I: I can see why some of the kids probably wouldn't have understood what that school was for.

WL: Right.

Doctor Visits

I: Do you remember seeing a doctor when you were growing up?

WL: Yes. I saw a doctor quite often. I had everything that came along when I was a kid.

I: Do you mean for contagious diseases?

WL: That's what I'm talking about. I also had a case of worms that was so bad I had to take a tablespoon of sugar and saturate it with turpentine to get rid of the worms. My mother gave me enema after enema to get rid of them.

I: What would there have been about the way you were living that would have made you susceptible to a case of worms? The water?

WL: Who knows.

I: Did a lot of other kids have the same thing?

WL: I don't remember if anybody else ever had any.

I: You said you went to the doctor, but it sounds as though you had a lot of home remedies, too. Sugar with turpentine! Tell me about a visit to the doctor when you were young. What was involved?

WL: Dr. Haun was probably the first doctor I went to. I can't remember anything about it.

I: Did you pay a visit to either of the hospitals here when you were growing up?

WL: No.

I: You were aware of both St. Joseph's and Grande Ronde hospitals, weren't you?

WL: Yes. They were building St. Joe when we were going to school. The old Grande Ronde Hospital was over on the hill at the north end of Adams Avenue.

I: Did they seem as remote from your experience as Ackerman School?

WL: Probably about the same difference.

Lack of Dental Hygiene

I: Do you remember a visit to a dentist?

WL: Yes. I went to the dentist when I got my teeth pulled; that was my own fault

because I didn't take care of them. I never did clean them.

I: When did the pulling occur?

WL: Probably around 1950.

I: Why didn't you take care of your teeth when you were young?

WL: My mother was after me to take care of them. Whether we couldn't afford the toothpaste or the toothbrushes I don't remember.

I: Did your parents take care of their teeth?

WL: They both wound up with false teeth. Does that tell you anything?

I: It does. I remember when I was in elementary school, a dental hygienist came to the school to clean every kid's teeth at least once a year. None of that in the schools here?

WL: No.

Bill as a Teenager

I: Did you go to dances at Zuber Hall or anything like that?

Former St. Joseph's Hospital
at 4th Street & K Avenue, La Grande
(now used for county offices & agencies)
Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

WL: No. I couldn't dance a stroke; I still can't dance a stroke. I knew a lot of the kids, and we'd go down there on Saturday night. I watched everybody dance.

I: Describe yourself at that time--how you looked.

WL: Of course, I had quite a bit of hair then, and I wasn't too bad looking.

I: How did you comb your hair?

WL: Straight back.

I: Did you put pomade on it?

WL: No. I can remember when my hair used to part in the middle, and I got the big idea I wanted to comb it straight back. It took me quite a while to train it to stay back like that, but I think eventually I did use a little bit of pomade on it.

I: Most guys did?

WL: Yes, most guys did.

I: Did you wear a mustache?

WL: No. I've always been clean-shaven.

I: Did you have pretty good muscles then?

WL: I was pretty husky, yes. I probably weighed two hundred pounds.

I: Did you dress so that people could see your muscles?

WL: Hell, no. I think clothes fit a little bit more loosely than now.

I: Where did you buy them?

WL: J.C. Penney's or Trotter's Men's Store.

Every time you had on a new pair of jeans, people asked, "Where'd you get them? Trotter's?" I could go down there and charge my purchases.

I: Did you ever buy a suit?

WL: I never did buy a suit.

I: Why?

WL: I just wasn't that type of guy. I've probably had on a necktie half a dozen times in my life. When I put on a necktie, I feel like I'm tied up.

I: What kind of shoes did you usually wear?

WL: I wore a lot of boots. I used to like boots a lot.

I: Logger boots?

WL: In that effect, yes.

I: Maybe rubber soles with cleat bottoms?

WL: Yes. We did a lot of walking from here to school, and that kind worked well, especially in the winter.

I: In high school were most of the boys dressing the same way you were?

WL: Nobody was fancy dressers then--just casual stuff, you know. When cords came out, everybody went to cords. But I couldn't afford them so, I didn't go to them. I still wore the overalls.

I: Did you wear bib overalls?

WL: I did for a long time; then I finally went to the waist overalls.

I: Did you have any kind of hankering to wear cowboy clothes? The farm boys probably wore those.

WL: Right. But I never had the idea to wear cowboy stuff. Quite a few guys and my friends wore cowboy stuff, but I didn't. I probably couldn't afford it to begin with.

I: When did you find out that there were whore houses in La Grande?

WL: Probably after I was married.

I: You didn't know in high school? Are you sure?

WL: I don't think so. They've had whore houses here for years and years, but in school we never paid any attention to them, I'm sure.

Various Jobs for Money

I: When you got to be teen-aged, were you finding jobs you could do around town for money?

WL: Yes. I mowed lawns. I packed two paper routes, one in the morning and one at night.

I: *The Oregonian* and *The Observer*?

WL: Yes. We didn't make very much money, but anything we could make was a good deal. I mowed lawns for Dr. Haun, a family doctor, who used to be on the corner of 4th and Spring. My folks owed him money, so I mowed the lawn during the summertime. From the $10 a month he paid, I got $5 and $5 went to pay off the bill. I didn't think too much of that, but it still worked all right. I had a little bit of money.

I: You mean you didn't like the idea of helping to pay off their doctor bills?

WL: I thought I should have more money, I guess.

I: What were you thinking you needed to spend money on at that period? Girls?

WL: No, hell, I didn't want to get girls.

I: Cars?

WL: In high school? No. The only thing I can remember buying a lot of was candy or just something like that--just junk. Don Rohan's son, Frank, and I ran around together a lot. We used to make a lot of money working for his dad. There was a carnival here one summer, and his dad got some of this wood I was telling you about. He said, "If you boys take that wood in the shed and rick it up, I'll take you to the carnival tonight and give you a dollar apiece to spend at the carnival." Boy, we were right at it; it didn't take us long to get that wood in there. We went to the carnival that night and spent about $10 or $12 apiece. We had more kewpie dolls than you could pack in your arm.

I: Did you win by shooting at targets?

WL: Throwing balls, tipping things over, and winning on this, that, and the other thing. We were always after him for something to make money. I don't think they had a great lot of money, but he was willing to let kids earn it.

I have two grandsons that help me cut wood; I give them money all the time. I don't mind giving them money, but I feel like they should earn it. Eventually they're going to have to get a job to earn money.

I: How did you get your *Oregonian* papers?

WL: I had to go down and get them from the railroad. They came in on the train in the morning.

I: Where did they put them?

WL: At the depot.

I: They'd just toss them out on the ground?

WL: No, I believe they had a four-wheel cart; they put them all on there. They had our names on them, and we got them off this cart.

1: Were they sorted by your name while they were on the train?

WL: I suppose so. They were wrapped up in a paper with my name on it.

I: When it came to collection time, did you have to go around to each house?

WL: Yes.

I: What did you do with the money?

WL: I'm sure there was somebody we had to turn in this money to.

I: Once a month?

WL: Yes.

I: Was it a hassle to go around and collect?

WL: No, not really. People paid pretty regularly. A lot of bartering went on. For example, one fellow who wanted to take a paper but didn't have money said, "I got chickens out here. Can I give you a chicken for the paper?" He gave the manager a chicken. We all liked that manager and got along well with him. He took us over to Cove for swimming once in a while.

My mother, my sister, and I worked at St. Joseph's Hospital. My mother ran the laundry, and I worked out in the laundry for about a month.

I: What kind of washing machine was it?

WL: It was pretty good-sized machine, made entirely of wood. It went around and around, back and forth, washing. I had to go over to the hospital, get all the clothes, sheets, and towels out of the chute, and bring them over in a cart. Then I dumped everything in the machine and later put them in the dryer. When I took things out of the dryer, I put them in another basket and went over to the mangle. Three or four women handled everything there.

I: Did your mother run the laundry as sort of a concession or was she on a salary?

WL: She was on a salary. If she needed somebody, she could hire whoever she wanted, including relations.

World War II and After

I: What happened to you at the time of World War II?

WL: I turned eighteen in June of '45, when several of us went to Portland to take our physical exam and passed it. Since I didn't want to go in the Army or the Navy, I went into the Merchant Marine for eighteen months.

I: Why didn't you want to go into the Army or Navy?

WL: My brother was in the Navy and loved it, but I didn't. If I got in the Army, I was afraid I was going to have to do a lot of walking.

I: Maybe you also thought you might get killed?

WL: Everybody believes that! I got a release from Jess Rosenbaum at the draft board to go into the Merchant Marine. I got on a troop train headed for Catalina Island to take training. I think that's about the time the patriotism really hit us during World War II.

I: After returning from service, what possibilities did you see for making a living?

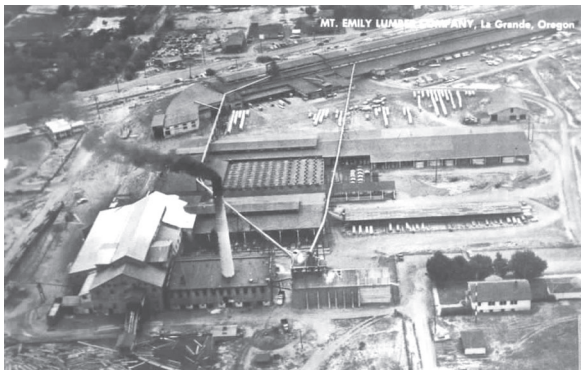
WL: About the only thing here in town was the Mt. Emily Mill, which I eventually went to work at, and that's when I met my wife. The main thing was that I was married, had babies on the way, and needed a job. It wasn't easy to get a job there; we had to go every day and stand in line to see if they were going to hire anybody. One day they did hire five people, and I was one of them. Most of the available jobs were on the green-chain--the harder work. I was a young punk then and tougher than boards, so it worked well for me. It was hard work, but, after I got used to it and toughened into it, it was OK.

I: Were these eight-hour shifts, five or six days a week?

WL: From eight to five just five days a week.

I: August Stange was in charge of it then, wasn't he?

WL: He was in charge of it, yes.



Mt. Emily Lumber Mill, La Grande, 1940s
Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

I: Did you ever see him?

WL: Yes. When I worked on the greenchain, he came over nearly every day and walked around. We'd wave.

I: A hands-on manager then. Do you remember what he looked like?

WL: He was a short, stumpy guy and nearly bald.

I: Did he seem to have a sense of humor?

WL: Yes, he did. I was kind of heavyset when I was working at the mill, and he made a big joke out of it. Of course, everybody laughed.

I: Tell me a little more about working on the greenchain--exactly what that involved.

WL: In the mill logs were cut through two or three different rounds--four-quarter or six-quarter--and then went through a re-saw. The re-saw cut it into regular one-inch boards in different lengths.

From there, it came out on the greenchain, which was probably a hundred and fifty feet long on top. Fourteen of us worked on the greenchain at the head end, where the lumber came out of the mill. There were places on both sides of the chain for us to pull different lengths and grades--two-by-fours, two-by-sixes, and two-by-eights. Five of us were on one side, six on the other, and three down below. Every half day, we rotated to a different station. It was hard work because this lumber was green, heavy, and coming knee-deep. The man on the front end was supposed to try and straighten the lumber out and also to pull six- and eight-foot lumber behind his station.

I: Were you putting the lumber onto carts?

WL: No. We piled the lumber on flat stackers--probably at least twelve feet high and sixteen feet wide--so the carriers could come along, pick up a block load, and take it wherever they wanted, usually the kiln to dry. They didn't dry two-by-fours then. All they dried was the pine--the four-quarter stuff.

The two-by-fours were put out in the yard until they dried. When this stuff came out of the dry kilns, it went over onto the dry chain, where men pulled it just like we did. A man called a grader knew what it was: number two, number three, or number four. Then the boards were run through the planer.

I: It sounds as though it was almost exclusively hand labor--nothing automatic about it.

WL: No, there was nothing automatic.

I: Did most of this lumber have knots in it?

WL: Some did and some was clear, called select, that was pulled in a place of its own. If it had a C on it, that meant it was a clear board. If it had knots, it was number two or three; if it was really bad, it was number four.

I worked for about three and a half years on the greenchain.

I: Did it do anything to your hearing? It was noisy where you were, I would bet.

WL: It wasn't actually that bad because there was a wall between the greenchain and the mill, so we didn't hear a lot of that noise. I don't think anybody wore earplugs.

I ran road grader for thirty-eight years of my life, though, never wearing earplugs, and that's the reason I am hard of hearing.

I: At the time that you were working on the greenchain, I'm guessing you thought the supply of lumber seemed inexhaustible; we'd never run out of lumber because you could see trees everywhere.

WL: Right.

I: Do you remember ever wondering whether we'd run low on supply?

WL: No. I never did think we would because there was so much timber in this country. Stange started logging up in the Starkey country. They cut the tree down, they went maybe seventy-five feet till they got a limb, and cut there. The rest of the tree was left lying there to rot. They took the best cut and that was it.

I still don't believe we will ever run out of timber. Nobody can make me believe it because there's too much timber. I worked twenty-two years for Boise Cascade and was all over eastern Oregon. I can take you to places where there never has been an axe or saw. We've got an inexhaustible supply; they do a lot of planting, which helps a lot. I don't believe we will ever run out of timber.

Hunting and Fishing on Men's Minds

I: Do you remember what you talked about with your co-workers?

WL: Hunting was on all our minds. Since we were all hunters, we got a big hunting party going each fall for elk hunting. Our main conversations were about hunting and fishing.

I: Why did the young men you talked to seem to be so interested in hunting?

WL: It seemed that everybody was interested in getting out in the woods, going fishing and hunting, and maybe doing a little traveling, though nobody could afford to do much traveling.

I: For recreation?

WL: Right. For recreation mostly.

I: Did it matter whether they actually got a deer or an elk?

WL: No.

I: Was that because they didn't need it for food?

WL: A lot of them did. I raised my four kids on deer and elk meat. If we hadn't had all that elk meat, they probably wouldn't have had much to eat. We also enjoyed going out in the mountains, camping, and were hoping we could get something. Doing that was the way life was in those days.

I: Were you out for several days at a time?

WL: No, the majority went out one day at a time.

A friend and I bought a tent and set it up above Tony Vey's [a meadow in the vicinity of Starkey, about twenty miles southwest of La Grande]. We took it up there on the Fourth of July and then went there every weekend we could all summer. We left everything in the tent--Coleman lanterns, camp stoves, and sleeping bags. We didn't worry any about anybody stealing it; nobody bothered our camps, but we couldn't do it now.

Later on, I got acquainted with an old fellow who had a cabin up near Rainbow Mine [approx. twenty-five miles southeast of Starkey]. We got to use his cabin for two or three years, spending a lot of time there hunting.

Playing Pool and Poker

I: What did you do for entertainment in town?

WL: I would walk to town quite often, go to the pool hall, and play pool with someone.

I: Which pool hall?

WL: The Corner Club, at the northeast corner of Adams Avenue and Depot Street. They had three pool tables there and a hamburger stand. I'd been playing pool there since I was fourteen years old. You were supposed to be sixteen. I guess they thought I looked like I was sixteen. I'd also go into Choate's Cigar Store and watch them play cards.

I: Poker? Tell me about that.

WL: One night I walked in there to get a cigar.

Portion of Tony Vey meadow, near Starkey, 2003
Photo by Eugene Smith

I: You were smoking then?

WL: Yes, smoking cigars. I never did smoke cigarettes.

I: What got you started smoking cigars?

WL: Oh, we just thought we were big shots. There was a brand called the Red Dot; a nickel a cigar was about all we could afford.

I was out of work the winter of 1951 and 1952, and, of course, I was at Virgil Choate's Cigar Store quite a bit, watching the guys play cards. One night I walked in to get a cigar, and a guy said, "Here, Bill," and handed me a $10 bill. He said, "The poker game's about broke up. Go back there and buy some chips." So I went back there and gave the guy ten bucks and got chips. So we kept the game going for a while.

I: Did he give you the $10 because he knew you were a good poker player?

WL: No. I never played a game of poker in my life in there.

I: Why do you think he did that?

WL: They wanted to keep the poker game going.

I: Why did he think that you could do it?

WL: Just the idea that I had been in there many times, buying cigars. He thought maybe I could hold the game together.

I: Where did you learn to play poker?

WL: We used to play a lot of Penny Ante Over.

I: At home?

WL: Yes. My uncles used to get together on New Year's Eve to have a big party, and we would always end up playing Penny Ante Over. So I knew a little bit about it, but we also used to play draw and stud poker all the time. I got down there to playing what they call lowball. I really didn't understand the game, but it's the lowest hand you can get--one, two, three, four, five. That's what they call lowball. Anyway, I lost the $10 that night and didn't pay any attention to it.

I: Were these all railroad guys or just a mixture of guys from all parts?

WL: A mixture of everybody--mill workers, railroaders, drifters. We used to have quite a few drifters come into town and play cards--from Milton-Freewater [approx. seventy-five miles northwest of La Grande] or Ontario [one hundred fifteen miles southeast of La Grande]. We had one come from Unity [approx. seventy-five miles south of La Grande]. These guy came in a couple of times a year and tried to get a big poker game going. They would probably win $200 or $300. Ordinarily, local guys played $40 or $50 on the table. But these guys always came in and bought $100 of chips apiece. Guys like me were run out because we couldn't afford that kind of stuff. They came in and tried to get a big game going so they could win some money.

A guy from Wallowa and a couple of loggers used to play all the time and thought they were high-rollers. Every now and then they got a big game going, with $1,000 or $1,500 on the table; some of the guys went $400 or $500.

I: Would you explain to me how the house got money from these poker games?

WL: To begin with, each player antees a chip, say, twenty-five cents. Then some body bets $1.50. According to how many people call him, the dealer looks at the pot and sizes it up; with $25 in the pot he might take seventy-five cents or $l--a certain percentage of each pot. This is how they made money on each game.

One night when I was watching, the dealer was taking a $5 chip from every pot. By the end of the night, they had played probably thirty or forty hands an hour, so this turned out to be pretty good money when they quit at midnight.

I: Did some of the players complain that the dealer was taking too much?

WL: Not very often. If they were winning a little bit, they wouldn't pay any attention to it. I never heard anybody complain about taking money out of the pot.

I: Tell more about how you got to be a regular there, when you were being paid to play.

WL: The man that ran the game said, "Billy, why don't you come in and work for me for a while? Come in a few days and we'll see how it goes." So I went there and hung around till about ten o'clock in the morning, when they wanted to start playing cards.

I: Where was Choate's?

WL: On Depot Street, near the present Red Cross Drug Store. So I would go down there at ten o'clock in the morning and there'd be three of us that played for the house. If somebody came in and sat down, one of us got up and made room for somebody with what they called alive money.

He said, "If you want to work for me, Billy, I'll give you $5 a day. You have

to be here at 10:00 in the morning and hang around till 8:00 at night. If the game is going well, OK, but, if the game gets down to three or four players, then you come sit in." He handed me $5 worth of chips. That's how I got into playing for the house.

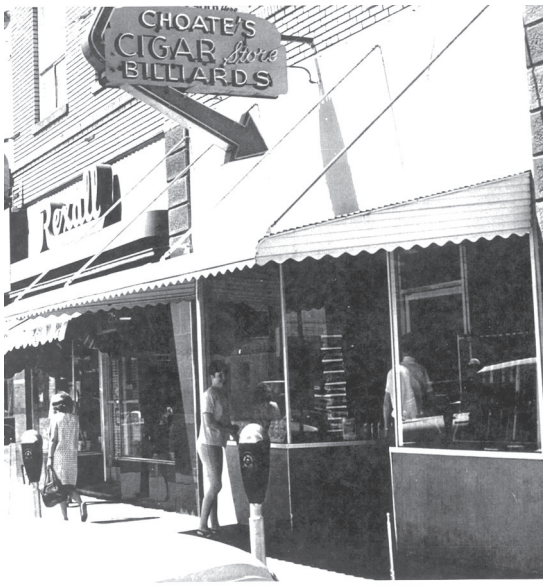
I: Were you guaranteed $5 a day whether or not you won?

WL: Whether I won or lost, I got $5 a day. If I did win a little bit, he always gave me an extra $5, so it worked out pretty well. I was on unemployment, which was $5 a day, so I was making $10 a day, tax-free money. So I thought I was really a big-time operator.

I: Could you earn more than $10?

WL: Oh, yes, according to what I won. If I won $40 or $50 dollars one day, I think he gave me $8 or $9 dollars.

I: Don't be modest about this, but were you considered to be one of the best poker players at that house?



Coate's Cigar Store (and card-playing room) on Depot Street, 1950s
Photo courtesy of Lee Flower

WL: No. I was a poor poker player. People could easily bluff me out. If they shoved a pile of chips at me, it scared me. But if I had in my mind that I had a really good hand, there wasn't enough money to bluff me out. But I lost a lot of times. You don't win all the time.

I: Did you ever notice any cheating?

WL: I saw the dealer--the man sitting behind the box--pulling some funny stuff one night.

I: What kind of a box was it?

WL: A little box about a foot wide and prob ably eight or ten inches long.

I: Was there a cover or top on it?

WL: It had a little shelf on it and chips sat in there. If somebody wanted to buy some chips, he gave them chips. Then all the money would go up to the cash register, the man working behind the bar. If somebody bought $10 worth of chips, he gave him the ten and put the money in the box.

I: So you were in the same room as the bar?

WL: Yes.

I: Were there drinks on the table all the time?

WL: No booze.

I: That was the rule of game?

WL: Yes. But they did keep a bottle back in the toilet area.

I: For emergencies!

WL: For emergencies, right. When the

games got going well, they went back and took a little nip on this bottle. Of course, that would loosen them up, and they were really going haywire then.

I: Back to the cheating.

WL: This dealer was playing head to head with some guy. I was standing back, watching, and I saw the dealer going second card on this guy. I thought, "Well, mighty..."

I; What does that mean?

WL: He's going down to the second card, not the top card of the deck. He was fudging around so he'd get the second card.

I: As though he planned it that way--what the second card would be?

WL: Right.

I: Do you think cards were marked?

WL: No, no marked cards. I couldn't imagine why he was doing that because this guy could see him just like I was, but evidently he never did see. That went on for about a half-hour. The guy lost $10 or $20. That ended that, but that was the only time that I can remember seeing any cheating.

I: Was poker the only game you played there?

WL: They had kind of a rummy game. It was on the other side of the room. I really can't explain it because I didn't really know that much about it. But if you got ten cards and had three trays or three fives or three sevens, it was worth a couple of chips. If it was spades, it was double. Then if you went down with ten-card with a spade flush, it was double also. Three fives was eight chips, three sevens was eight chips, and three trays was eight chips. It was kind of like a rummy game.

I: While these poker games were going on, was there any conversation about subjects other than the game?

WL: Yes, talking about hunting or working or fishing. It was just all BS.

I: Were most of the men acquainted with each other?

WL: Yes.

I: Do you think they were playing poker mainly with the hope of winning, or was it just socializing?

WL: I'm sure they were playing with the idea of winning a little bit. Once in a while they did.

I: Did you have any dealings with Virgil Choate himself?

Virgil Choate (l.) & his father in Choate's Cigar Store, 1950s
Photo courtesy of Lee Flower

WL: Virgil eventually took over another place down Depot Street. If the game was getting weak, he'd come up and get me so I could get in that game. Or if the other game up at the cigar store filled up, I went to his other place to play.

I: Do you think Virgil was making quite a bit of money out of this?

WL: I'm sure he was making good money.

I: How could you tell?

WL: Easily. He dealt in guns also and made a lot of good money on guns. His dad was the one that started the place and, Virgil eventually went to work for him. He never seemed to have trouble buying anything he needed. I'm sure Virgil made pretty good money.

I: Did he buy fancy cars?

WL: I don't remember anything fancy, but whenever he wanted a new car, he bought it. I'm sure he had more than the ordinary person.

Virgil Choate showing one of the shotguns he had for sale at his cigar store, 1950s
Photo courtesy of Lee Flower

I: Did you do this poker-for-hire scheme for more than a few months?

WL: I was in there three or four months in the winters of 1951 and 1952. In the spring of 1953 I went to work for the state. That was about the end of my poker playing for them.

Union County's Rainbow Gold Mine

I: Before we talk about your work for the state, tell me about the Rainbow mine, near your hunting cabin.

WL: You can get to the Rainbow mine and Indiana diggings by following the road along the Grande Ronde River from the Starkey area. There are piles of rock and dirt left from the days when a dredge worked there in the mining days. We built a new road up there when I was working for Boise Cascade Lumber Company.

I: Does it look like the area around Sumpter [former mining town, about forty miles south of La Grande]?

WL: Yes. Boise Cascade built roads through the Indiana diggings. To protect the old diggings, stakes had been set that I was not to go past. Perhaps they wanted to leave them for history. The road was not to disturb that area.

I: As far as you know, had the mounds been built in the early part of the twentieth century?

WL: Yes. I would say after the '20s.

I: Were they mining gold, as far as you know?

WL: Yes, they were mining gold.

I: Do you have any idea how successful they were?

WL: They were pretty successful for a while, but how long it lasted I do not know. There was a roadhouse or hotel at the top of the hill near the Rainbow mines. Miners stayed there.

I: Did it have a name?

WL: Woodley was the name of the town. There used to be a sign there, but eventually it was thrown away. There was a lot of mining up in that area in those days [i.e., late 1800s].

Bill's Desire to Drive Trucks

I: After that little detour about mines, let's come back to your work at the Mt. Emily Mill. What happened to that?

WL: I just walked off the mill out there one day at noon. I had to be a truck driver. That's all there was to it.

Mining dredge tailings along Grande Ronde River, approx.twenty-five miles southeast of Starkey, 2003
Photo by Eugene Smith

I: Were you actively looking for work as a truck driver while you were playing poker at Choate's?

WL: Oh, yes.

I: When did the big break come in the truck-driving job?

WL: It never did come. I finally give it up. I got a job with the state. In the wintertime I ran a snowplow--the kind that has a snowplow on the front of a truck. Then in 1953 they broke me in on the grader; from then till 1969 I ran a grader, plowing snow with it in the wintertime.

I: If you had this dream of being a truck driver for so long, was there kind of a disappointment not to be able to do that?

WL: Yes, there was.

I: Would you rather have spent the rest of your life driving semis from here to Texas?

WL: At one time I thought I would.

I: What was so glamorous about that line?

WL: I'll be damned if I know. A little boy's dream I think, probably. I was so damn' glad that I got it out of my system. I had enough truck driving for the state. I would never want to be a long-haul driver.

Bill as Road Builder

I: I'd like to hear more about your experience as a road builder. Did you operate a bulldozer?

WL: No, only a road grader.

I: Did you use that for logging roads?

WL: Logging roads, yes.

I: Why would you need to grade a logging road? I thought a bulldozer would do it.

WL: No. You have to keep it smooth. The Forest Service used to be awful fussy about this. When Boise was going to log a tract of land, I had to go in and blade the road up, pull all the ditches, and make sure the road was in good condition before they would let anyone log on it. After they logged on it for a year or two and tore it all to hell, I got to go back in and reshape and smooth it up. We built roads all over eastern Oregon from Halfway [in Baker County, about twenty miles from the Oregon-Idaho border] to Ukiah [in Umatilla County, about forty-five miles from La Grande], wherever they were going to get timber.

I: Was that hard work?

WL: It was. I started this when I went to work for the state; the man who ran the grader finally had enough of it and wanted to quit and go to another job. There were three or four fellows ahead of me, but they didn't seem to want it so they broke me in on the blade. A man walked along side of me, thumbing me when he wanted me to raise the blade. After two or three years of this, I knew to steer the grader but I didn't know enough to work alone. Then he quit. The new foreman said, "Bill, if you think I'm going to walk along that grader and tell you what to do, I got news for you." It took me five more years to leam to operate the grader. After sixteen years, I got really good at it.

My cousin told me that Boise was going to start a logging site and needed a road-grader operator. I followed up, but my wife said, "You have sixteen years' seniority with the state. Are you going to quit that and go to work for this fly-by-night outfit?" Although we were so far in debt that we couldn't see over our heads, I'd made up my mind I was going to take this job with Boise, so I did. She pretty near divorced me. I decided I was going to take every hour of overtime they would give me to make it pay.

I: Did other people than your wife think that the Boise Cascade Company was a fly-by-night outfit when it started?

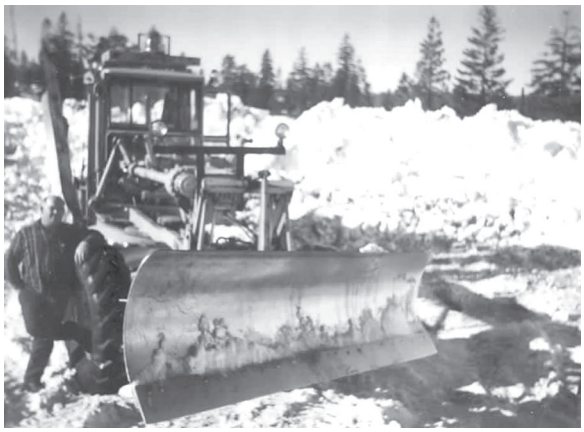
WL: Yes, they did.

I: Why?

WL: I don't know. I never could figure that out; I figured, if you wanted to work, Boise Cascade would put you to work and your paycheck would come in every two weeks. Everything would be good.

I: Had it just been formed as a company when you started working there?

WL: Yes. It used to be Boise-Payette in Idaho, maybe it was Boise Cascade when they came to Union County. They bought the Mt. Emily mill from Stange.



Bill and his road grader turned snowplow on Ruckle Road (Boise Cascade logging road near Summerville), 1975
Photo courtesy of Bill Lovan

It has been thirty years since I went to work for them. The benefits were good, and I always made good money. I had a couple of bosses that weren't all that great, but you have that every job you're on.

When I quit the job with the State of Oregon, I was making $575 a month. The first month I worked for Boise Cascade, I made a $1,000, but I put in a lot of overtime. Many days I worked fifteen, eighteen, or even twenty-four hours a day on that grader--plowing snow in the wintertime, but it paid off for me. I loved my job--running the equipment and especially the road grader. I started out with a brand new road grader in 1969 and had it eight or nine years.

Then they got me another new road grader that was just like a Cadillac--a nice chair to sit in and a board where all the controls were that I could bring back into my lap or whatever length I wanted to operate from.

I: Some of the logging roads I've seen are very steep. At what point are you in danger of tipping over in a grader?

WL: You can pretty near lay them on their sides before they tip over. You can hold yourself with the blade. I pretty near tipped one over working for the state. I was up on the Starkey road, above where the Starkey store is, where they wanted to bring down a high bank. When I got up there, it slipped sideways. The diesel tank on the back, behind the cabin, had fuel running out of its filling spout. I had to have one of the trucks get up on top of the bank to get me back up. The bank was too steep for me; I would have rolled. That was about the worst I ever got into.

When I finally decided to retire, a couple of fellows asked, "Bill, you can run my old grader if you want us to keep working." I said, "I don't want to upset you, but I don't want to go back to running the Model-A. I'm used to running the Cadillac." I did work for two different fellows, but I finally decided, "Bill, you got off that grader; get away from it."

Boise Cascade's Success

I: What do you think was the key to Boise Cascade's success as a company?

WL: As far as I was concerned, they were a good company to work for. The bosses wanted employees to work safely and do the best job they could--which I did. I loved my job.

I: Did they modernize the way lumber is handled in mills? Would that have been part of their reason for success?

WL: Yes. They have modernized this mill out here a great deal. Lumber used to come out of the mill on a chain and had to be pulled off. The new owner put rollers on the edge of the chain so that the lumber nearly slid off by itself. The stacking part has all been modernized, too. If Mr. Stange could come back and look at it, he wouldn't believe it.

I: So it's a much more efficient operation, both from the standpoint of the kinds of jobs they give to laboring people and the use they make of the wood?

WL: Yes.

I: They use nearly every piece of each log now, don't they?

WL: Every piece of it, yes. The wood that we

used to get--mill wood--had all kinds of bark on it, but now they run it through a de-barker; water pressure blows all the bark off. So everything is modem as can be, but, during this modernization, they have taken out a lot of jobs.

Other Sawmills in Union County

I: What other smaller mills in Union County do you know about?

WL: There was one at Alicel [about four miles northeast of La Grande] for a long time. I worked for a little mill on Fox Hill [northwest of La Grande, just outside the city limits] for two or three days, while my brother-in-law and I were out of work; everything was done by hand on the greenchain, and we worked our butts off.

There were two mills on Glass Hill, one called the Lewis and Lindsey Mill at the twelve-mile post and the other on Rock Creek. The one on Rock Creek had a railroad track into it from the Starkey highway; during the first part of World War II, a lot of the machinery and the old railroad cars were cut up for scrap iron. Paul Farmer, a man from Arkansas, came here quite a few years back and started a mill on Glass Hill.

Sawmill work wasn't easy, but maybe they thought it was easy money, since they could get the timber for hardly anything.

A House Built with Bill's Two Hands and Some Help

I: Living in a house like this is quite a bit more comfortable than the one you first lived in, I should say.

WL: I built this myself.

I: Why did you do that?

WL: I couldn't afford to buy one to begin with. My dad and I started with a twenty-by-thirty house here in 1948, right after I first got married and we had one child. He ran a little dairy here and was going to use part of the house to store his feed; we were going to use the other end for us.

Pretty soon we had more than one kid, --two boys and two girls--so we had to take the rest of it. We lived in it all right; all the kids slept in one bedroom. It was tight by the early '60s, so I started adding on to the house. I had a lot of help pouring the foundation. I got excited about adding on so that now we have such a house we can hardly heat it in the wintertime.

I: How long did it take you?

WL: Fifteen or twenty years to get everything done.

I: What do you think about all the other houses around you? Are they inspiring?

Lovan family house on B Avenue, La Grande, 1978, after additions
Photo courtesy of G & D Fleshman collection

WL: No. I don't care for them because they have made my property value go up sky-high. We used to go out in the back yard in my shorts if I wanted to, but I don't dare do this anymore.

Reflections on Government and Politics

I: During the years that you've lived here, were you paying attention to anything about city or county government--politics or the way government services were provided?

WL: Yes, I do pay a lot of attention to it. It pisses me off.

I: Why?

WL: They don't run it to suit me.

I: Can you be specific about that? Are you complaining about the cost of water and sewer service?

WL: Yes, I am complaining about it. It's not necessary. Another example is the City Council's buying property downtown--the old Bohnenkamp building [on Adams Avenue, near the center of downtown La Grande] that burned down; they had no business buying that. They're trying to run a city and shouldn't be buying property.

I: The problem there was that the owner set an outrageous price for it, and nobody else would come along and do anything. It's an ugly blight.

WL: The city had no business getting into real estate.

I: You wouldn't admit that there are extenuating circumstances for that building as opposed to any old building?

WL: Probably not. That's my opinion.

I: Over the past several years, has it been your impression that the city and the county were not doing things efficiently or were not making the right decisions?

WL: It has been my opinion for years and years and years that they don't. Let's get to Union County for a minute. Union County had no business buying a golf course [i.e., the fairly new Buffalo Peak Golf Course in Union]. They have no business buying a railroad [i.e., the Joseph Branch line between Elgin and Joseph that has been used for freight in recent years but at one time included passenger service from La Grande] without going to property owners and finding out their opinions. I don't believe this is right. [The joint Union-Wallowa County railroad ownership is projected to offer dinner-train excursions between Elgin and Joseph and thereby to be a tourist attraction.]

I: Which property owners?

WL: Me.

I: You mean all the voters in Union County?

WL: The people who own property. Right. I think this railroad is going to get them in trouble. We'll just have to wait and see, but they cannot spend $4 million just on their say-so. They've got to come and ask me and you what we think about.

I: You're telling me that there's been some political activity going around here that might be questionable?

WL: You hit the nail right on the head.

I: You're certainly entitled to that opinion because you've lived here for a long time.

WL: My sister and I get together and hash things out every now and then. My wife tells me, "If you guys don't like this, why don't you go down to the City Council meeting and tell them?"

I: Why don't you?

WL: I just don't want to get involved. I guess that's the way everybody is. You can't please everybody.

I: Would it be true to say that life has changed for the better in most ways?

WL: I'm sure it has changed for the better.

The Mayor of Old Town?

I: Why does Dorothy Fleshman call you the "Unofficial Mayor of Old Town"?

WL: Probably because I'm the oldest male in Old Town. I've lived here in Old Town for seventy-five years.

I: You've outlived all the other possible candidates?

WL: One year Dorothy put in the paper, "Happy Birthday to the Mayor of Old Town." [Dorothy Fleshman wrote for *Eastern Oregon Review*, a weekly newspaper published in La Grande in the 1970s.] I got calls and somebody wanted to give me a pizza. I think that's probably why it is. I don't know of anybody who has lived here longer than I have.

I: I understand. It's semi-humorous.

WL: Yes.

I: However, longevity counts for something.

WL: There you go!

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