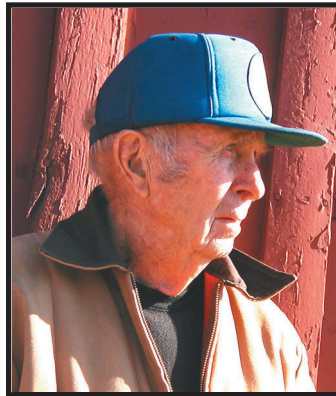


GLEN MCKENZIE

Union County resident for 85 years

AN ORAL HISTORY



Interview in June, 2002
at his home in the Grande Ronde Valley

Interviewer: Thomas Madden

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 Interviews and This Edited Version

The interview with Glen McKenzie took place at his home on his Century Farm near Summerville. At age 85, Glen is physically vigorous--still working his farm--and extremely alert mentally.

The interviewer was Thomas Madden, a volunteer with the Union County, Oregon History Project. He completed the one-hour interview on June 19, 2002.

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

- reorganization of content
- deletion of some extraneous comments
- omission of false sentence starts and other normal speech fillers that detract from readability
- normalization of pronunciation and grammar in conformity with standards of written English.

GM designates Glen McKenzie's words, *I* the interviewer's.

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Creating a Telephone System in Union County

- I: Do you want to talk about the early telephone system that you experienced?
- GM: Yes. There was an organization called the Summerville Telephone Association. I presume it was a legal organization. It consisted of all the people who had telephones out in this area. It had one paid employee, and that was the man who was the secretary. He sent out the bills and bought the materials that they needed. One of the local young fellows was generally the line-man. He was paid as he worked on an hourly basis. At that time they had to climb all the poles. There were no boom trucks or anything like that. They put the climbers on and up they went.

The local people actually built the line. I remember that every spring a number of the people would go up in the mountains and cut down trees to use for poles. They'd peel them there, and then they'd bring them out and stockpile them someplace. The holes were all hand dug and hand lifted with pike poles to put them in the ground. Then the wires were strung.

It wasn't all that dependable because every time a storm came by the phones wouldn't work anymore. So you had to find somebody to go fix it--especially in the wintertime. Many times in the winter we didn't have any phone at all.

The phones--and I'm not sure how many lines were out in the Summer-

ville area--all went to a central station in Imbler. Central simply consisted of a switchboard in a lady's home; she was Central. The telephones were all the kind that had a crank and a magnet that rang the bells. The power was very small. There were just two dry batteries in each telephone; I don't know what the voltage was. They looked like big flashlight batteries. So the voltage couldn't have been very much.

If you wanted to call somebody, it was done by a system of ringing. Each individual on that particular line--I'm not sure how many people were on a line, but probably not over six or eight--had a coded ring. Somebody's ring was two shorts; someone else's was a long and two shorts. I remember that our ring was always a long and four shorts, which I think was as long a ring as there was. If you wanted Central, you simply gave 1 long ring and that would alert the lady. It generally was a lady that did that.

- I: If you wanted to call somebody and you knew that their ring was, say, four short rings, you had to ring the four short rings yourself, on your own phone with your crank?
- GM: Yes. When it rang, every phone on the line rang--not only the one you were after but all the rest of them. This posed some interesting kinds of conversations sometimes because there were people who knew to listen in on you; we always called it *rubbernecking*.

Because of the very low power that

this telephone system had, if several people picked up the phone, there wasn't enough power to run all of the telephones.

I: Were they mounted on the wall?

GM: Yes. Long distance calling almost wasn't done. Once in a while we'd need to call La Grande. When we did, we'd ring Imbler and tell her who we wanted to talk to in La Grande. She would call La Grande, and most of the time we would tell the lady in Imbler what we wanted and she would repeat it to La Grande. We simply didn't have enough power to get the voice all the way to La Grande.

I: Do you recall when this system was established?

GM: No, I don't know. As long as I can remember, it was here. I don't really remember either when the post office

was established in Summerville, but it probably came along about the same time.

I: Was it here in the 1910 to '20 period, maybe?

GM: I think earlier than that. I would guess maybe 1905 or '06 because we have a picture of this place in 1910 and the telephone lines were here then. I don't recall anybody that didn't have a phone. Maybe a few people that lived down off the road a ways didn't bother to use one.

I think of another interesting thing: Summerville had the first dial telephones in Union County. That was kind of strange. The only people we could dial were the people in the Summerville Exchange, and it had just three numbers; I remember ours was 264. I'm sure it was the first dial telephone in Union County.



First house on T.T. Glenn farm (no longer existing), 1885, with family (left to right): Ed (left), Hattie, Daisy, mother Sarah with baby Mina, Tolbert, Bill, Bud, Guy (not yet born: Myra)
Building at left is a cellar with walls filled with sawdust for insulation

Photo courtesy of Glen McKenzie

I: Do you recall when that came in?

GM: That would have had to have been in the '30s. I think I was in high school then. La Grande didn't have dial phones. Beyond Imbler, I don't think there were any dial phones. I don't know why they showed up here.

I: Could you make a long distance call to Portland, for instance, or Baker City?

GM: Yes, you could. The message had to be repeated along the line because the telephones here didn't have enough power to go that far. I think it was possible, but I don't know that it was ever done around here. Whenever people wanted to send a message a greater distance, they always used Western Union.

I: Was there a telegraph office in Summerville?

GM: No, but there was one in Imbler.

I: So you could go over there?



Rear of first house on T.T. Glenn farm
(no longer existing), 1885,
with unidentified family members
Photo courtesy of Glen McKenzie

GM: You could do that by phone, I think.

I: Were telegrams hand delivered to most people?

GM: I think they were. I know they were in cities. There were always young boys on bicycles. Telegrams were always kind of scary things. Most of them said somebody had died.

I: The bringers of bad news.

GM: I guess the phone company was actually purchased by West Coast Telephone Company, and the lines were put underground, I think, throughout the county about twenty-five or thirty years ago. There are no more overhead telephone lines.

I: You mentioned that it was a local group of farmers and people in Summerville who put in their money to get the phones. Did the group have a name?

GM: They formed the Summerville Telephone Association. Apparently, it was a legal organization of some sort. I don't know what the original investment was, but they were self-supporting. They bought everything and did all the work.

They had just one employee: a local fellow named Hans Hacker. He was the secretary, who sent out the monthly bills, bought the wire, and that sort of thing.

There had to be an original investment, but I don't know what that was. It was

all up and running as far back as I can remember.

I: Do you recall what the monthly charge would have been for the phone?

GM: It was just a few dollars, if that, I'd suspect.

I: You said it was there when you were growing up. Did you notice people of the previous generation having difficulty using the phone?

GM: No, I don't remember that anybody had any trouble using them. I'm just going back to about 1920s, where my recollection starts.

I: So the crank phone with the self-powered line would have pretty well gone out in the '30s?

GM: Yes. As soon as the power line came, the phones all changed.

Rural Electrification

I: Did any homes have electricity before the power lines went in?

GM: The power line didn't come here until 1934. A lot of farms did have electricity previous to that. They had their own generating plants. There were two names which were pretty familiar: Delco and Kohler. They were thirty-two-volt direct current; that supplied only enough for the lights.

I: Were they gasoline powered?

GM: They had a gasoline generator. You

had to charge the batteries at least once a week or maybe more often than that. I remember my mother had a thirty-two-volt iron that she liked to use, but it drained the battery so quickly that it really was hardly worth the trouble.

Of course, when the power came in, that power was used on the phone line, so they got lots better. Part way in to La Grande there was a large dairy--N. K. West Dairy. They had their own one-hundred-ten-volt power plant for a while. It was a water-operated outfit. They had piped a spring up in the mountain to run a Pelton wheel. N. K. West was one of the community leaders. In fact, he had the dry goods store in La Grande in the area that is now burned out [on Adams Avenue]--West Dry Goods Store. He was the main promoter of electricity for his dairy.

I: Was that part of the Rural Electrification Administration?

GM: I don't think it was part of Rural Electrification. I think it was mostly N. K. West. Everybody along the line had to sign up. It's hard to believe that people would quibble over five dollars, but the power company required a five-dollar-a-month minimum charge, and some people didn't want to commit to that. Of course, there was more to committing than the five dollars. They had to have their houses wired, since most of them didn't have electricity. It would have been expensive.

Then they had a little trouble with where to put the poles. A couple of people along the line, where the poles

logically should have been on their property, simply wouldn't let them do it.

Mail Delivery

I: How did folks get access to a daily or weekly newspaper? Did they come by mail?

GM: They came by mail. In fact, all packages came by mail. The post office had no competition. We and everybody else did a lot of ordering from Montgomery Ward, which was located in Portland. Sears was located in Seattle. The postal service was amazing. We could send an order off to Montgomery Ward on Monday, and it would be here on Wednesday. It was common to get your order back in two days. I think the postal department went downhill when they stopped using the trains. Service was so quick because the mail was sorted by postal employees as the trains traveled.

I: Where was your nearest post office?

GM: Summerville had it.

I: Did you go over to Summerville to mail a letter?

GM: We generally just left it in the mailbox, and the carrier picked it up.

I: Everybody had their own mailboxes?

GM: Yes. As far back as I can remember, while the railroad was here, the mail came in early in the morning on the train that went from La Grande to

Joseph. It was taken off at Imbler by an individual in Summerville--the one I remember was named Murdo McCrea--every morning. He went out to meet the train to get the Summerville-area mail and brought it back to Summerville. It would be sorted there.

I: Did that train operate once a day--one trip each way?

GM: Yes, one up to Joseph in the morning, back in the afternoon. I guess it was a combined passenger and freight, but I think there were also freight trains by themselves.

My wife, a La Grande girl, said her dad was a great fisherman. He liked to fish on the Wallowa River. I guess he knew the people running the train. He'd get on the train in the morning, and they'd stop someplace on the Wallowa River and let him off. He'd fish all day and, when they'd come back in the evening, he'd get back on.

The first mail carrier I remember was Miles Woodell. He lived two roads



William Chattin, first rural mail carrier
out of Summerville, 1899
Photo courtesy of Glen McKenzie

north of me. You have to remember the roads were all dirt--no gravel or paved roads. So in good weather--this was the time of Model T Fords--the mail carrier came around in a Model T Ford. But when the weather was bad, he'd have to come with a horse and buggy. In the wintertime he'd come with a horse and sled. When he was reduced to using horses, he couldn't make it all the way around his route in one day. Fortunately, he lived about halfway along his route, so he'd make half the route one day, and then he'd be home; the next day he'd make the other half of the route. There were days when we only got mail every other day in the wintertime and when the roads were bad.

I: Was the mail carrier employed by the postal service?

GM: I'm sure he was; it was the same as it is now. I don't know when that service started.

I don't know how in the world they communicated before post offices came in. What did they do? Just send letters with somebody going back in the direction it came from?

If a package was too large, it came by express or freight on the train, and we had to go to Imbler to pick it up.

I: How would you find out that you had a package? Would there be a note with your mail?

GM: They generally called.

I: Was mail normally delivered six days a week in good weather?

GM: Yes.

I: How was the plowing of roads handled?

GM: They weren't plowed. That was where the horses came in. There was no such thing as plowing snow. Most of the traffic then would have been horses and sleighs. They make a pretty good track, after somebody breaks the track first. There was always traffic by here, but it was horse and sled traffic in the wintertime.

I: If you needed to go to Summerville to shop or get groceries, did you go by horse and sleigh?

GM: Yes, or horseback.

We don't have any post office in Summerville anymore. You can buy stamps there and mail letters, but they don't have a postmaster. I think there were a lot more post offices in earlier years. They were scattered around everywhere, especially along the railroad. I'm sure Alicel had a post office at one time.

Getting Newspapers & Magazines

I: Did newspapers and magazines come by mail?

GM: Yes. As long as I can remember, we took the *Oregon Journal*, which was a daily Portland paper. (At one time

Portland had three daily papers.) We always took the *Oregon Journal* and *The Observer*; they both came by mail.

I: Did they come whenever the mail was delivered?

GM: The paper was generally a day behind when it had been published.

We had a lot of things to read. We took a lot of magazines. The *Oregon Farmer* was a staple of most farm folks and *Country Gentleman*. I took one called *Boys' Life*. I don't think any of those are being published anymore.

I: Were you a family of readers, in addition to all the hard work on the farm?

GM: Yes. I'm not sure how far my folks went with education. I don't think

either one of them went to high school. They just had eight grades. My mother went to Pleasant Grove School, which is sort of where the Grange Hall is now. My dad went to school in Summerville. They were avid readers and well educated, as far as I was concerned.

At one time--way before my time, when my dad was a kid--there was a newspaper in Summerville, the *Summerville Sun*.

I: Was it a weekly?

GM: Probably.

I: Do you remember getting a weekly newspaper in the family, or did you just get the two dailies?



2nd Pleasant Grove School, 1902
Glen McKenzie's mother is in the center,
with a high-neck black dress and hair on top of her head
Photo courtesy of Glen McKenzie

GM: There were a number of weekly newspapers in the valley. The one we took was the *Eastern Oregon Review*. It lasted through several ownerships. There was a weekly paper in Elgin and one in Union, the *Union Republic*.

I: Was the *Eastern Oregon Review* published in La Grande?

GM: Yes. It was started by a man named C. J. Shorb. His son, Paul Shorb, works up at the hospital now. It went through several ownership changes. I'm not sure when it disappeared, but it lasted a long time. It had a very popular column, written by a lady in La Grande, Mabel Morton. She called it "Around the Valley." She wrote personal items about individual families, something you don't see at all anymore.

I: Did you get the Sunday paper as well?

GM: I think we got the Sunday *Journal*. It came on Monday.

I: Did *The Observer* do a Sunday paper in those days?

GM: No.

Getting Radio Reception

I: Do you remember when radio came in and how that worked?

GM: Yes. I think my folks had the first radio in this end of the valley. This was in 1924. In fact, we still have it. It was handmade by a man named Heacock in Enterprise. I don't know how my folks got the idea of buying it. They bought

the Heacock radio and he came over and installed it.

I recall it had to have a massive antenna. They put a pole right beside the house--not this house, a different house--and then another pole maybe a hundred yards away and strung two copper wires between them for an aerial. It ran on a six-volt wet battery and a forty-five-volt dry battery. When they first turned that thing on--I'm still amazed--the first station they got was KDKA in Pittsburgh.

At that time there was no restriction on the power of stations. There weren't very many stations, but there was a powerful one in Denver and one in Louisiana that we picked up. The programs were a little strange. The announcer would talk for a while, and then there'd be a long dead pause--nothing going on--while he figured out what to do.

I recall that a lot of people came to hear our radio.

I: Did some kids build their own radio sets?

GM: I think the plans and directions for those probably were in *Boys' Life*. I remember we'd take a round, cardboard box--I don't remember whether it was oatmeal--and we'd get some fine wire and wrap that around to make a coil. Then we'd have to buy a gallium crystal--a little thing smaller than a dime. It was in a base and suspended above it was a wire, which you could move around so that it would touch various

points of the crystal. The wires were hooked into the coil. Then you had to have some dry batteries to run it and a headset. When you moved around on this gallium crystal, you would get different frequencies.

I: You could pick up a station?

GM: You could pick up a station.

I: Were these stations you were mentioning a moment ago--the ones in Denver and Pittsburgh--on all the time or just a few hours a day?

GM: I think just a few hours a day, I think--very few.

I: During daylight hours?

GM: Actually, the reception was best at night. I think maybe it was from six to nine. I know they weren't on twenty-four hours a day.

I: Did they have some musical programming?

GM: I think it was mostly records.

I: Did they also have news broadcasting?

GM: I don't recall that they did have news.

Shopping

I: Where did you do most of your grocery shopping?

GM: As I mentioned, I grew up in the time of Model-T Fords, so generally once a week my folks went to La Grande.

Most farm families took something in with them to sell--eggs or sausage or bacon, for example. They had a rule that they should come home with more money than they went in with. They didn't buy much. Everybody had huge gardens, chickens, pigs, and milk and dairy products. So salt and flour and a few things like that were really about all they bought.

I: Who were the buyers for, say, the eggs? Would the stores buy them?

GM: Yes.

Farming--Then and Now

I: What are some of the major changes that have taken place in agriculture in the Grande Ronde Valley during recent years?

GM: I think probably the most remarkable change in agriculture was when we went from real horses to horsepower, with the internal combustion engine. When we had horses, the farmer provided his own fuel. He raised hay and oats for the horses.

Now all of a sudden, when he bought this gasoline guzzler, he was dependent on somebody else. He had to buy his fuel. That made a rather profound change in the way he did things because the farmer lost a lot of his self-sufficiency.

The trend lately has been--and it's not related primarily or only to agriculture--that the small operator in almost any business is having a tough go of

it. The mom-and-pop grocery stores have mostly disappeared. The small service station: there's no such thing as a service station anymore. They sell gasoline and wash your windshield, maybe, and that's about the size of it. Sort of the same thing is happening in agriculture.

One of the real problems of agriculture at the moment is that the costs continue to increase substantially, but prices received have increased hardly at all. In fact, wheat is now selling here for less than three dollars a bushel. Back in the '50s, it got up to six dollars a bushel. That's kind of tough to take. When we had our first gasoline tractor, I think gasoline was twenty cents a gallon.

Somewhere along the line, we got the idea that bigger is better. I don't know that I particularly agree with that. The agricultural colleges have promoted that idea a little bit. Certainly the equipment manufacturers have promoted that--always wanting to sell you a little bigger tractor or a little bigger combine. When you got the bigger combine, then you could harvest more grain, you needed more acres, and the farm got bigger.

It was a self-generating sort of thing to the point now that it is almost impossible to buy a small piece of equipment, at least an American-made one. Little tractors--maybe twenty, thirty, or forty horsepower--if you find one--may have *John Deere* or *Case* on them, but I assure you they're made in Japan or Korea or Spain or some foreign place. The manufacturers have almost com-

pletely abandoned the small machine market in this county. They've gone to huge machines.

I was at a demonstration yesterday of the agricultural tour that's an annual event here in Union County. They were showing two similar seeding machines that not only put the seed in the ground but also fertilize at the same time. They're monstrous machines. They have probably a span thirty-foot-wide and carry the grain in a bulk tank. It takes a huge tractor to pull the thing. One of the fellows said they were selling right at one hundred thousand dollars. It takes a lot of three-dollars-a-bushel wheat to pay for that thing. So farmers are sort of compelled to get more land. In a way, it's a little bit self-defeating, it seems to me.

When you buy or lease your neighbor's land, he was a small farmer and now he's out of business. He's got to find a job someplace else. I'm not sure that's all great. We see that with all the static about Wal-Mart [a recent announcement that Wal-Mart wishes to build a superstore in Island City to replace its existing smaller store]--same thing.

- I: Is the family or small farmer finding it harder and harder, then?
- GM: It's very, very difficult to make a living by farming anymore. We hear a lot about corporate farms, but many family farms are corporate farms--incorporated within the family. So-called corporate farms, which are owned by stock holders someplace else, are pretty rare. I know of only one in Union

County. That's the Seven Diamonds Cattle Ranch in the south end of the valley beyond Union. That is corporate owned.

Corporate farmers have not had good success in places where they've been tried. There were several truly corporate farms in Umatilla County that have gone bankrupt. Farming is something that requires somebody right on the land, looking at it everyday. You can't run a farm from a hundred miles away.

I: Or visiting it once a week?

GM: It doesn't do the job. So there has been a great change in agriculture for sure. Foreign competition has gotten immense. We've kind of shot ourselves in the feet. I know quite a few years ago we were sending people to Iran and a lot of other places, teaching them how to raise wheat. Now, all of a sudden, instead of buying wheat, they're selling wheat. So we've made our own

competition in places. Labor costs so much less. It's kind of a tough go.

I: Is it possible for young people today who grew up on farms around here to go into farming?

GM: It happens sometimes. The Arnoldus family is a prime example of that. The father and two sons have formed Trico Corporation--a family corporation. The sons are working there, and they have expanded a great deal. They own some land, but they rent a lot of land, too.

I think the majority of farm kids now are going to go someplace else. If they're going to be in agriculture, they're not out working in the ground; they're going to be marketing or in chemicals or fertilizers or something like that--related to agriculture but not farming itself.

I: But seventy-five years ago, wasn't it possible for a family with good land



Three plowing teams on T. T. Glenn's farm, Summerville, Oregon, 1906
Photo courtesy of Glen McKenzie

and good work ethic to make a decent living?

GM: Oh, yes. In fact, that was possible not too long ago. I think the best years we have had here were in the '50s. Prices for our crops were decent, and the costs were much lower. The costs are one of the things that have escalated beyond belief.

Even what we would term a successful farmer now--and there are a lot of good successful farmers--has an off-farm job someplace, either the man or the wife. Donald Starr is one of our more successful farmers here, but his wife works in town so that there are two incomes. That's not at all uncommon.

I: When you were growing up and living on the farm, nobody worked off the farm, right?

GM: You might have worked for the neighboring farmer, but you didn't have to go into town.

I: At harvest time, might you help the neighboring farmer?

GM: That was frequently done. Not everybody had harvesting equipment--or at least threshing machines--so there was a lot of mutual help there.

I: Why did people work together well in those days?

GM: I think in a way you almost had to because there wasn't anybody else around. I think that's also one of the reasons why so many of the old families are all related here. There was nobody else to marry. People weren't really as mobile as they are now. Your help was next door, probably. I'm sure there was a lot more cooperation then.



Harvesting equipment at Glenn farm, 1906:
binder (left), thresher (center), steam engine (right)
T. T. Glenn standing in box above white horses

Photo courtesy of Glen McKenzie



Grain harvest crew at T.T. Glenn farm, September 3rd, 1906
Photo courtesy of Glen McKenzie



Threshing operations at T.T. Glenn farm ca. 1906
Photo courtesy of Glen McKenzie

That showed up in a lot of ways, not only at harvest time. I remember there was a hog-butchering time here on this place. Mostly family came here; my mother had four brothers that all lived around here. They'd bring their hogs over here, and we'd spend several days butchering hogs.

I: In fall?

GM: Yes. Not everybody had the facilities either. It took a scalding vat and a number of other things.

Another great change in the valley is that you don't see a lot of fences anymore and you don't see a lot of livestock. You never see a hog anymore out in the open. Hogs used to be grazed just like cows. They just turned them out in the stubble, after they had

harvested the grain. There's always some grain in the stubble. That required some pretty tight fences when you did that--fences everywhere. I can't say about cattle, but I think there are only two people raising hogs in the valley. Monte Carnes is one and I think there's a hog operation over by Cove. When I was a kid, everybody had hogs and chickens.

I: What about beef cattle?

GM: They've always been around. I think there are probably as many beef cattle now as there ever were, but they're localized. Not everybody has cattle, but the people who do probably have more, especially in the Union area. You see good herds of cattle.



T. T. Glenn's sacks of grain delivered for shipment at Imbler, 1906;
sacks weighed in and identified at head of line
Photo courtesy of Glen McKenzie

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