

ARMAND MINTHORN

TAPE #1

December 16, 2005

Interviewed by Micheal L. Minthorn

Transcribed by Micheal L. Minthorn

Side A

I: This is an oral history interview about Native American involvement in the Grande Ronde Valley in Union County with Armand Minthorn. It is uh, Friday, December 16th, 2005. All right, um, now naturally you and I both know that uh, uh, the Grande Ronde Valley has been a, a by-way at least if not a gathering ground for natives from the area for uh, hundreds of years. Um, that's what we're here to talk about today. Um, we're looking for stories for uh, history of natives that in particular have evolved out of Union County. And so I'm here to talk to you about that. What can you tell me?

AM: Well the, the history of the Grande Ronde Valley goes back at least 4,000 years. Not a couple hundred. There's archaeological sites in the Grande Ronde Valley that have been dated 2,500 and even up to 4, 000. La Grande, of course is known as "Kop koppa" which means place of cottonwoods. And even before the Treaty of 1855 was signed, um, La Grande or Kop koppa was the traditional gathering grounds for all of the tribes. Um, mainly because of the fish and because of the camas root. But they would gather in the Grande Ronde Valley and it was a traditional gathering ground. The last known traditional gathering in Kop koppa was prior to uh, the Treaty of 1855 where they gathered there to talk about the white people. To talk about the treaties that were being struck with neighboring tribes. That was the known, last known gathering, traditional gathering there in La Grande. Um, just before the treaty of 1855 was signed.

I: Were those uh, were those the treaty signing tribes that met there?

AM: Yes. Umatilla, Yakama, yes mm-hm. Um, Baker, Oregon has two names. Uh, "hanyuma pen was," and uh, "ty aht timme la cum." Uh, baker was the gateway to the Grande Ronde Valley, to the Blue Mountains. This is an area that was um, as you, as it might be termed: guarded. Because of the Shoshone-Bannocks. That was their, um, route to our area- one of their routes to our area. And of course as we know the Shoshone-Bannocks were our traditional enemies. But this is the two names for Baker. Going further north, Elgin we call "la coll la coll." That uh, that means uh, place of the small pine trees. And in going east on Cove, Oregon we know that as "wewa la tit puh." And, that means small brooks or small streams coming together. But because our history goes back at least 4,000 years, um, we have known burial sites over there. But we also have sacred sites. And it was these two components that through the cultural resources program, that we were

able to document and archive such places. We had many, many inadvertent discoveries in the Grande Ronde Valley because of development and they've uncovered archaeological sites. But mostly burial sites. And that's very sad but the occupation three by our people is- um, has been demonstrated very clearly. And even today as a reminder to us, Island City- there is a battle that took place there with the Cavalry. And it was Clarence Burke that told us about this battle. And that there was a long tent near where present day Island City is. And they were having uh, a religious service like we do today. Were using the drums and the bell. But, it was the Cavalry that come and they heard the singing, they heard the drums. And they, they told themselves that the Indians are getting ready for war. We need to strike soon. And then that's when the battle- they say is when the battle started. But, there was women, children, and old people that were killed near Island City. And right near Island City there's a small concrete post with a small brass plaque. That sites the battle. But what it doesn't site is number of Indians that were killed. And Clarence always talked about this battle because the Indians didn't have a chance and they were worshipping and the Cavalry, um, misinterpreted that.

I: Are there um, are there known burial sites that we have an interest in, in Union County?

AM: Yes. They're only known to us.

I: And there are several? Lots?

AM: Several.

I: Um, how about the uh, what was the feeling of the tribe in the recently resolved uh, business with the uh, uh the burial, or the bodies that were underneath Inlow Hall at Eastern Oregon University?

AM: The tribes became involved because there was several non-Indians that said, "No there are not Indians buried in this, uh, pioneer cemetery." We disagreed because there were several inadvertent discoveries right in that area. But there was no clear way to demonstrate that we were *not* buried in this cemetery. And that's why the tribes became involved. We had a building that was built on top of a cemetery. And they knew that they built on top of a cemetery. So the tribes along with some local citizens and the university, um, have at least two meetings now. And the final decision was to leave the burials intact and to seal the entrances to the burial sites. That, the university itself is to draft a policy for any ground-disturbing activity on campus. We haven't seen that policy yet.

I: That was an agreement to be done by the university for in the case of future discoveries, or?

AM: Yeah. But, the Inlow Hall isn't limited to where the burials are.

I: Right.

AM: Or anything else. So the university recognized that and they agreed to make this policy with us, which we have not seen yet. Also the university agreed to a plaque. To commemorate the ones that are buried there along with the Indian people that are buried there. And we haven't had any communication on that plaque, either.

I: What, what other tribes and uh, communities used the Grande Ronde Valley besides ours? Can you address that a little bit more? Uh, we know it was a meeting ground but was it, uh was it used for other purposes? A local highway I suppose? Uh, for people in that area. Did people actually live there?

AM: Yeah. Um, again it's the archaeological sites that show our occupation there and the kinds of foods and tool they used. Um, it was in a sense a highway. Um, 'cause from the Grande Ronde Valley- 'course it leads to the Blue Mountains, but from the Grande Ronde Valley it also- there was also a path to- or a trail to the Powder River, the Burnt River, and the Strawberry Mountains. And that's always been our ceded area as Umatilla tribe. But Umatilla, Walla Walla, and Cayuse were the main tribes that used and occupied the Grande Ronde Valley. Until recently the Nez Perce, because of the intermarrying between the Cayuse and the Nez Perce it's then that the Nez Percés- um, we shared it with the Nez Percés in using our area. But everything was there. Food, fish, um, everything.

I: So it was like- uh, a gather- what, not just a gathering place but a place to go and- did they take things from there and bring 'em over to our side of the mountain? Was it uh; was it just where we would end up at certain times of the year?

AM: According to- and this is- the Grande Ronde was one of the many places that was- uh, is because of the foods. And like- it's a cycle. People would end up in the Grande Ronde Valley, uh, during, uh, late summer because of the camas. And because of the fish that were then coming up to the headwaters. Um, but then they would cycle back. But according to the seasons how the foods were ready- that dictated where they went. And the Grande Ronde valley was one of those places. Especially for the camas root.

I: And the fish.

AM: And the fish.

I: Uh, were there any uh, ceremonial events that were known to have taken place uh, of special gatherings of natives in the area? At particular times um, either before or after uh, white settlement?

AM: I'm sure that there was ceremonies that they had. Um, just like we do today. You know all of the ceremonies that we have today. Um, were more back in our great-

grandparents' days. Um, because Indian people, uh, were bound by ceremony and tradition. Because of their relationship to the land. And we had to honor the foods and recognize them in such a way so they/we could continue to have those foods that we lived on. That gave us life. It's not like today when we can go to Safeway or McDonald's. Then the ceremonies were specific and they were part of the unwritten law. And today it's no different. So ceremonies, the singing, the dancing it all took place there.

I: Did uh, did our people trade with other tribes? Was there trade and other sorts of commerce that went on? Would ewe have conducted that sort of business in that area as well?

AM: Yes. Um, right at the mouth or the entrance to Ladd canyon is what they call the "stokah" site. And this site is a huge, huge site- archaeological site that the main source is that "stokah," um, what they call "stokah" quarry is __ salt. [187] People came there to trade for the salt. That material could make tools, could make weapons. It was very clear because material from the "stockah" has been traced to uh, uh, La Grande. Have been traced to John Day. Have been traced to what they call the Wild cap site on the Columbia River. Which is just below, uh, the John Day Dam. So- and then even there was some source material found at Hanford Reservation. Present day Hanford because of archaeological sites there. So people came there to trade not only for the salt, uh, with the salt but the camas. Was camas was just abundant- it was everywhere.

I: And only in that area, though?

AM: Only in that area.

I: Uh-huh. Um, so you talked about the battle at Island City? Were there other known battles that took place that have been uh, that have been handed down story-wise to us or other, uh, source of major confrontation?

AM: There were many, many battles in the Grande Ronde Valley. And this was just one of 'em here at Island City. Um, but there were a lot of uh, I guess you call it skirmishes or smaller battles with the Shoshone-Bannocks. Most of them were with Shoshone-Bannocks. There were a few with the Paiutes, got too close in the Grande Ronde Valley. But it was specifically the Cayuse people here that everybody was- everybody was scared of. They feared the Cayuse. Um, at one point like Clarence used to- like Clarence said one time, "In ancient times," he said, "was constant fighting for the Grande Ronde valley. And it was the Cayuses that always prevailed." Because Shoshone-Bannocks wanted that valley 'cause of the- the abundance of food. But it, it was the Cayuse that became known as fierce, fierce warriors. And it was the Cayuse people that, um, made their dominance in the Grande Ronde Valley. But Clarence always used to say that at one time there was a lot of fighting for the Grande Ronde Valley and who owned it. But we prevailed. And now today our traditional use area goes clear down to, um, the

Powder River. Uh, east or west along the Strawberry Mountains. Up to Willow Creek along the Columbia and up to Hanford Reach in Washington state and then down and then over to Wallowa Lake and then over. 6.4 million acres that's original use area.

I: Did we ever, uh, uh, before uh, or I suppose even after white settlement, did we ever settle any of those traditional use amongst ourselves between Shoshone-Bannocks or Paiutes?

AM: Not until recently. Um, our, our enemies have always been enemies. And it was until the white man come here that, uh, we recognized that the white man was too much. There were too many of them. And because of that, it was the Shoshone-Bannocks in the late 1880's- just not too long after the railroad track was built here. But that's what, um, Clarence used to talk about, too. Was the Shoshone-Bannocks came here by train in the late 1880's and they camped at Thorn Hollow. And it was at Thorn Hollow that the Shoshone-Bannocks gave us a whip. And because they gave us a whip it's then that we started forming an alliance with each other because we couldn't stop the white man coming. They were only getting larger in number and they were taking our lands. They were killing our people. And it was then that Shoshone-bannocks recognized that and they came here. And that's when our alliance began forming. Too, that's when the Shoshone-Bannocks brought the big drum here. So, the late 1880's is when we started, uh, forming alliances with out traditional enemies.

I: Was the Grande Ronde Valley the source of any, um, major celebrations?

AM: Only the- only the one was the traditional use, traditional gathering area. But I'm sure that, and again because of the archaeological sites that are there. I mean there's sites just everywhere. But, the main food there was the camas.

I: Did the tribe have any, uh- talking about, um, more in the more modern or up-to-date era. Does the tribe currently have any projects, um, going on in, in uh, Union County or Grande Ronde Valley?

AM: Yes, we have many. And they- we have fish restoration activities. Habit restoration. Cultural resources protection. Natural resources, uh, enhancement projects. So there is a number of things that's going on in Grande Ronde- water quality, water quantitation, um, trying just- trying to secure water in the Grande Ronde. So there's a number of things that's going on over there.

I: So, uh, Grande Ronde Valley is not sitting out in the dark?

AM: No.

I: Um, I, I was told by a couple of elders that I interviewed, uh, particularly in the um, Elgin-Imbler region. Uh, about- they talked about Indians coming to uh, pick

up hides from hunters to trade. Things like that with the non-natives over in that area. Know anything about that, or? Uh, this would be- I'm guessing uh, I think one of these stories was told to me that maybe took place in the 1940's or 50's.

AM: Well I'm sure that all of those things continued in one way or another because that's what tradition is about. And that's what seasons and foods are all about. You go to the place where the food is and you go there because the people before you and the people before them and the people before them- they all continued to come back to the same place. As time went on, less and less people continued to do that. And then they come to a point where they don't go there anymore. And that friendships and even the on-Indians- the earlier ones that were here- their descendants remember our descendants that went there. So there was uh, friendships and relationships established because of those generations.

I: Do we, uh, do we currently have any, uh, current celebrations or activities that take place over in the Grande Ronde Valley in this day and age?

AM: The only one I know of is that Eastern University- their uh, Mother's Day Celebration.

I: Uh, annual. Did you have any involvement or uh, have you been to any of the native uh, arts fairs that used to take place over there in the 70's and when we were young adults?

AM: Yeah. I was a young adult once.

I: Yeah?

AM: And I went to school at university of- it was called Eastern Oregon State College then. Yeah I remember being at those art fairs.

I: So you attended Eastern as well?

AM: Yeah.

I: Yeah well what did you study? What do you remember from that time?

AM: Forestry. I remember I was studyin' forestry then. I was just out of Job Corps. Um, I don't remember much.

I: Did you uh, did you complete your program? Did you live over there?

AM: Yeah I lived over there for about two years.

I: Uh-huh. What part of town?

AM: I was in uh, uh, student housing.

I: On campus? Um, what was it like to attend uh, Eastern in those days? Was there a strong Native American program or presence on campus then?

AM: Oh, geez, back then they had a very large Indian club. And there were Indians from all over. And they were a strong club then because they had several Indian activities that took place throughout the year. And of course the biggest one was the Mother's Day, which is still going today. But back then, um, in the 70's, uh, the number of students- the number of Indian students was high. It was very high.

I: Would you say there were more than a hundred on campus?

AM: Oh yeah. There were at least 150.

I: Is that right?

AM: Yeah.

I: And they were from all over the United States?

AM: All over the United States.

I: It seemed like Eastern, uh- now we have another person that I hope to also talk to which is uh, Lou Farrow. You know we've been sending students to Eastern for decades or, or longer, uh, just from this tribe. Uh, to go to school. Were there a lot of our tribal members going to school at that time?

AM: Oh yeah. Um, there was a lot our- Umatilla. There was a lot of Warm Springs. And, at that time there was a lot of Alaska Natives going to school. And they had their own club because there were so many of 'em.

I: Uh, the Alaska Natives had their own separate club?

AM: Yeah.

I: Did they have the same advisor or how did that work out?

AM: I don't know.

I: Okay. Um, uh, would you say that, uh, it was a good program that they had going there considering the number of people that, that went?

AM: Yeah it was a very good program. It was a very good club because they were well organized. Um, they had their own structure and they had a very good relationship with people on campus as well as off campus. And that was the thing, too, was the

Indian club they reached out to community members and um, organizations to help support their activities. And that's what made it so unique because the committee- or the community and local retailers. They all contributed. And that's what made, um, the events so strong.

I: Now was this uh, this Mother's Day event that you're talking about, was that already going on when you first started attending Eastern?

AM: Yes.

I: And had that been going for some time before then?

AM: I don't know.

I: Um, did- were you involved in that during your time on campus?

AM: Yes.

I: Were you, uh, were you doing uh, traditional things like you do today?

AM: No.

I: At that time?

AM: No.

I: Mm-hm.

AM: I was young and naïve then. I just got my Celilo funds, so, nobody could tell me nothing.

I: Right. Right. Uh, what, what kinds of things- what were people majoring in, in the native crowd uh, that you might have been involved with at that time?

AM: Then, um, like I had two partners from Warm Springs. And it's said to say they are both gone now. But it seemed like the Indians then- their main focus was, uh, social field. Um, counseling, social services. Um, there were a lot of 'em that took natural resources, fields and particular courses that then seemed like the social services field was one of the top uh, areas that they went into.

I: Um, was it, were those- uh, the forestry program that you were in. Was that strong program at that time?

AM: Yeah it was very strong. Very strong.

I: Um, who were some of your classmates, uh, from Umatilla at that time? From here?

AM: Um, Amos and ____, [485] Levi Morrison. Um, geez I can't even remember now.

I: Did you have any, uh, did you have any uh, special assistance or other types of help, uh, was it, was it a struggle academically for Natives at that time?

AM: People who would go to college, it was a big struggle 'cause you don't have the assistance you do have now. With um, higher education. Then um, the tribes did help some but the majority of the assistance came through loans.

I: And um, so you didn't finish your program, uh, while you were there. Uh, was that a valuable experience, however, going to school at Eastern?

AM: It was. Um, you know education like uh.

End of Side A

Side B

- I: December 16th, 2005. We're talking about Eastern Oregon University and uh, the late chief Bill Minthorn.
- AM: Bill Minthorn said at one time and he recognized it, too. He said, "You're gonna' come to a time where you're gonna' have to learn what the white man is learning. You're gonna' need the white man education. You're gonna' need to go to college to survive." Um, there's always- because there's so many white people and we live in a dominant society. And we are a minority. We are gonna' have to be educated as Indians to get along, to prosper, and to grow." He said, "There's no way around it. We have to get educated." That's what Bill said.
- I: Do you think that, uh, there might be more opportunity to uh, interact in the future with the university and native students, and, and uh, what do you think?
- AM: Um, the Inlow Hall incident- the President there agreed to come here and make a ____ [018] to the Board of Trustees. Um, that kind of interaction is always important because it creates a means or creates dialog that- uh that's exchanged on how the university can help us and how we can help the university. So vice versa. Uh, Walla Walla College. The Whitman College recently installed a new president and he's very interested in coming here to meet with us. So those kinds of interactions are important. Not only because our Indian students that go there. But how we can help our Indian students and how the college can help us help them.
- I: So that's a benefit?
- AM: It is a benefit.
- I: Did you know that when you were going to Eastern in the 1970's because- you know I've been over there for a few years- uh, attending school. Uh, it seems common knowledge among uh, I talked to uh, some of my friends that went to school there in the 60's and earlier and a lot of people seemed to have known that those bodies were in the basement all along. Um, any idea why it would have taken decades for that issue to be resolved? Did anybody oppose- uh, did anybody speak up then?
- AM: No. I think probably the reason it's taken this long to become known is because nobody wanted to deal with it. And just, if we don't talk about it then we won't have to deal with it.
- I: Did you know then?

AM: No, huh-uh.

I: Uh, it's- I, I also sort of got a take from reading the local media around that time that previous administrations at the university in the recent past, um, didn't really have a plan to deal with that, um, sort of incident taking place.

AM: Mm-hm. I do, too, because well- no one really wanted to deal with it. And second, nobody had the experience to deal with anything like that. And then third, there was no laws that kept it- sites or, that could help take care of those kinds of situations.

I: My understanding was that uh, in America- not Native America but in America that many cemeteries were paved over when they got in the way. Uh, and uh, possibly this is just another incident or an example of such things taking place. Because they covered their own as well. Anything else you can contribute about Union County right at the moment? Uh stories, names, places?

AM: Well the only thing is, um, Union County as a whole and the residents in Union County and- they need to recognize that the tribes in protecting known and unknown sites- we need help. Um, there is state laws, there's federal laws, there's county laws that protect these sites. There are still people knowingly in Union County that continue to dig up our graves. That continue to loot archaeological sites. It's only because their father did before them and their grandfather did it before them so they see nothing wrong with it. There are consequences. And the tribes- we can't be everywhere all the time. This is where we need help. Education is probably the biggest tool in uh, dealing with some of these situations. If people knew about the law, if they knew the significance of such sites and resources that would help alleviate. But we would also give eyes and awareness so they could make their local law enforcement aware of such things going on.

I: And do we have a position on saving- one thing I discovered in some of my travels over there and conducting the interviews is that um, uh, the one thing that's most common of all that's collected uh, that can turn up anywhere- is my understanding in yards as well as in public places are arrowheads. Um, it seems likely that as many of those may have fallen or been discarded haphazardly. Um, as opposed to taking them from known burial sites or anything like that. Do we have a position on that?

AM: There's a law, a state law that protects those. And a person cannot remove an artifact, an arrowhead. That, that object is protected. Both state and county and even federal law.

I: Even though it turned up on somebody's private property?

AM: Exactly. And that's the thing, too. They may own the property but they do not own the resources. And a lot of non-Indians argue, "You can't tell me what to do on my land. You can't tell me what I can do or not do with these arrowheads that are on my land." That's the argument. But state law protects those.

I: In spite of that.

AM: In spite of that.

I: So, so, what's the uh, what's the right thing to do? Especially for people, um, uh, who possibly have had, uh, lots of these things handed down in collections, you know, maybe for generations in their family. It's possible some of these are closely guarded and maybe kept a secret. So what would somebody- what would somebody do to make that right? Um, or sort of still, I guess we would say come out "win-win."

AM: We had a very large archaeological collection donating to Tamastalikt in 1997 and this was a _____. [111] Uh, the elder of that family died but he collected because his father collected and his father collected. And they had a very, very large collection of artifacts. And that family, the elder that died willed that- these artifacts go to Indian people. And that collection came to us. So a lot of people are doing that now.

I: Is that the right thing to do then?

AM: Yes. Or give the collection or donate the collection to a museum or a university.

I: Who would make them come right here to our door? Uh, so if it were given somewhere to an entity like that- that would- that would go a long ways to make it right?

AM: Oh yeah.

I: Thank you for participating in our interview.

End of Side B

End of tape #1

Transcription completed on Friday, October 26, 2007