

Oscar Howell

1976, T1, S1

AH: Hello. This is Ann Howell. Today I am interviewing Oscar Howell, my grandfather. [pause] Okay. I understand this is the old Josie Imbler homestead, is that right?

OH: That's right. And the...my folks came out from Illinois and bought it and lived here from Jessie Imbler. And at that time they had included the Billing's place and where the city of Imbler is now. And afterwards, why, the city was born and the old school that I started to was a house the Wilhelm's are living in now. And at that time it was setting over next to the railroad track. And then eventually they built a school this side of where Harold Bingaman lives. And I went to school there. And at one time the...well, at one time they had the district divided when they built the new school in Imbler. They divided...they had the two districts for a while and the people on this side went to this school that was on Bingaman's and the others went up there. And then finally they consolidated and we all went up to the big school that they go to now.

AH: The big brick building.

OH: Yeah.

AH: Okay.

OH: Now my father died when he was twenty-five years old and my mother was a widow until she was...well, she was forty years old when she got married the second time. And Bogus Welch farmed her place. She rented the land out and he farmed the place until they grew up and she got married. And she married a man at Walla Walla by the name of Dennis McCullin. And we moved over there and I went to school over there and...at College Place, an Adventist college. But I didn't go to the Adventist school, I went to the other school and graduated from there. And married a Walla Walla girl. We drove the team over here after we got married. First we went on our honeymoon and went down to Seaside. Then we came back and I worked...come over and worked on the place here for forty dollars a month and Helen she loved the Grande Ronde Valley. She liked Grande Ronde Valley lot better than she did the Walla Walla. And she got homesick, though. And one night at four o'clock we took the team and the buggy and headed out for Walla Walla. We got up on top of the mountain up here and both of us went to sleep. When we woke up the team stopped the side of the road and just standing still. And we went on over. We got in there pretty early in the morning to Walla Walla. Now I don't know...

AH: __[tape interruption]

OH: Before the road was built in in order to get to La Grande we had to drive the horses. And it'd take a half a day pretty near to drive in to La Grande. And in the wintertime we had to go crossroads and then lots of times they'd drive out through the field. Then finally they began to get the highways. And at that time the railroad didn't go through, only to Elgin. And they got the highways in and before they got the highways in we had a bank and a drugstore, two merchandise store, a hardware store here in Imbler.

AH: ___ Did you have a movie house?

OH: Hmm?

AH: Did you have a movie house?

OH: They had what they called the Legion Hall and they had movies in there. And they had lots of serials where they'd show part of it once a week. When the snow got deep and at one time we, Helen and I, had to ride the horses up there to see the serial. [laugh] [tape interruption]

AH: Okay. ___ just a sec, let me ask it. How long has this ranch been in the Howell family?

OH: Eighty-three years since the Howells bought it from Jesse Imbler. And there was the ___ farm that was east of ours and north of Imbler there's a Sam Brooks farm, pretty large farm. And a lot of these places are smaller now. They've been broke up and they're smaller farms than what they used to be. And in those days when we farmed it was all with horses and it was pretty hard work to walk behind a six-horse team in the soft ground and running a harrow. ___ after I got to farming on my own I bought Fordson tractor. Even my wife learned how to drive it.

AH: I understand that Summerville was a pretty rough town. Was Imbler a very lively town?

OH: When they had the Legion Hall in once a year the American Legion would put on a dance. In those days it got pretty rough with people'd come out from La Grande and there was quite a few of 'em that would get pretty well liquored up. It was a pretty wild town. At one time we made an arrangement with the bank. We all had saddle horses and six shooters and we put on a show as gonna hold the bank up. So we rode our horses in the town and shot the gun off and some of the guys was standin' around on the street corner shootin' at us. And the man come out of the bank and give us the supposedly money bags and we took 'em and drove up, run up towards the other part of town and it was all over. But there was a pretty show while it lasted. Imbler used to have a ball team. Elgin had a ball team. Alicel had a ball team. Cove and La Grande each had ball teams. And that was their main entertainment in the summertime was the ball games between the different teams. [tape interruption] On the Fourth of July we'd generally have a ball game and in some cases we always knew where the bucking horses was. And they'd bring in the bucking horses up there where the school is now and we'd put on quite a show there on the ball diamond riding the buckin' horses. A regular Wild West show.

AH: Got a few cowboys in the area?

OH: Oh yeah. We'd ride everything and anything that'd buck. And it used to be if we had a mean horse and a team we'd take it out and put the saddle on it and get our satisfaction. [tape interruption] And in the summertime we'd do most anything to have a job. Pick up potatoes in the fall. And at one time I...everybody had a milk cow in Imbler. And I got a contract with 'em herding 'em along the road clear over next to Mt. Harris for pasture. Then I'd deliver 'em in the evening and they paid me a dollar and a half a cow a month. And that's one way I got some spending money. I had to buy some ammunition and once in a while some clothes. [tape interruption] Another time, or different times, the fence wasn't too good along the road and the town cows would pasture along there and they'd

break in. And we had kind of a large corral, chicken hairs we called it, big pickets. We'd run 'em in there and then ride 'em. The old cow's pretty hard to ride. If you don't believe it try it sometime. [laughs] [tape interruption] About that time our house burned down. We had finally got out of debt and we built us a new machine shed. So we moved what furniture was saved, we saved the most of it, the piano and the parts we couldn't buy. And we lived in there for five years until I saved up enough money to build a house. ___ the kind of a house we wanted to build. And we decided on a block house. And we'd been saving money for quite a while. And Helen met me out in the yard along the middle of the summer and she said, "Oscar, when are we gonna build that house?" We had been undecided on the location before and finally she said, "I don't care where you build it, but if we're gonna build it let's build it now." So we got busy and we built the present house that we built in up on the hill where the cellar used to be. And she got...she wanted big windows and she got the big windows. It was quite a little planning, but that's the way we got the house. And we just had enough money to pay for it when we got through. [tape interruption] In those days there were a lot of beaver and muskrats here on the river. I got a state permit to trap beaver. I didn't need one to trap the muskrat. And I trapped 'em and skinned 'em and the meat looked pretty good out of one that was about half grown, a young one, and I butchered it. My wife cooked it, it taste pretty good and she canned part of it. And somebody store a jar out of the cellar with the beaver in it. We always wondered what they thought when they opened that jar up and eat the beaver. [tape stopped] [long space] [piano playing]