

Jerry Bingner

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TM: This is Tom Madden. It's March 20th, 2003. I'm at the home of Jerry Bingner, 601 Washington in La Grande. Today Jerry is going to, for the Union Country Oral History Project, Jerry is going to be talking about a number of things, but one of the issues, Jerry, that I think you were the proprietor with your spouse for a such a long time of Joe's Grocery. I know one of the issues you wanted to discuss today was Joe's Grocery, which was at the corner of Washington and Cedar, correct?

JB: Yeah.

TM: So would you... Would you like to begin by talking about Joe's a bit? Anything you want to say about history, background, anything.

JB: I'd be delighted. The origin of the story should begin with my mother's life. She lived at the end of Adams Avenue as a young lady. She and her widowed mother, my grandmother Joel, had moved here from Missouri after the death of Grandmother Joel's husband. Grandmother Joel came to La Grande following several of her brother's who had come here ahead of her. So my mother was in the what at that point in time was a very small building. As a matter of fact, the original grocery store is the little house that sits west of the grocery store today. But she was in there one day and the owner/operator was a man named Oscar Crossen. My mother has told me this story so I'm sure that this is the way it happened. She asked Oscar what would be a good thing for her to fix for supper that night. Oscar said, "I don't have any idea. Fix whatever you want." My mother said, "If I owned this grocery store and somebody asked me that I'd have a suggestion for that person." Oscar said, "Well, if you're so darn smart why don't you buy this place?" So at age 16 my mother bought the grocery store became the proprietor and the store was called Joel's Grocery, which at that time was her name. It was in 1916... That was in 1913. Then in 1916 she and my father were married and he was the chief clerk of the superintendent...

TM: Hold it. This thing... Excuse me. This is... Let me go back and see just what we've got here. I'm just wondering... [recording interruption] Jerry, I think you were talking about your father and mother right after they'd gotten married. We have a little break there so if you'd like to continue with that, go ahead.

JB: My dad was chief clerk to the superintendent of the Union Pacific Railroad, which was a very fine job for a young man at that time. But as several years went by he thought there was a future in the grocery business so he quit the railroad in 1923. He and my mother built the... Moved the little store to the west and then built the building that is the grocery store there today. That was in 1923. Then they owned and operated the store until 1946. I got out of the Navy in 1946 and came home and immediately started to work in the grocery store. I ran the store from July 1, 1946 until I sold the store to Dick and Connie Knowles in October of 1976. So I ran it thirty years and a little over three months. The store was good to us, but I would kind of like to interject right here perhaps a tribute to my wife because I think that whatever success we had in the store was probably eighty-percent Winnie's credit and twenty-percent mine. And I always knew and was very proud of the fact that Winnie was smarter than I was. She was a very intelligent gal. One of my early responsibilities in the grocery store, and I think probably

I was six or seven years old, was when I came home from school each afternoon my job was to go in the back room of the store and cut the strings off of hundred-pound sacks of potatoes and dump 'em on the floor. Then I'd stack them up in ten-pound paper sacks. We had an old platform scale that I weighed them on. I usually had to do two hundred or three hundred pounds of potatoes each evening. That was my first chore that I remember in the grocery store. In looking back during those years after I got out of the service and the store was mine, at that time in La Grande there were thirty-two grocery stores. Today I would say there are three or four plus a few little mini-markets in the service stations. Thirty-two grocery stores, that was a lot of 'em.

TM: Were these all pretty much smaller neighborhood stores?

JB: They were almost all small neighborhood...neighborhood stores. If I remember right, early in...in the early '40s there were either two or three Safeway stores. They were not one big market as we have today, but there were several smaller Safeway stores. Then they consolidated and built the store on the site of the old La Grande Hotel. Then that building was eventually torn down and the new one that's just recently, or in the process today, of being demolished was built.

TM: Where was that original Safeway? The old La Grande Hotel? Where was that site?

JB: That was on the corner of Adams and Fourth. Where the store is now being demolished.

TM: Oh.

JB: 'Cause they built the new one at the far end of Adams.

TM: Mm-hmm.

JB: One of the things that let small grocery stores stay in business in competition with the big stores like Safeway and Albertsons was a reliable and helpful wholesaler. I was very privileged to have an outstanding wholesaler that got his...actually got his start pushing a handcart and selling groceries off of it. That was Fred Meyers. Fred Meyers bought a wholesale grocer...grocery out of Spokane, Washington called Round-Up Grocery. He became my chief source of supply for many, many years. Fred had a lot of sympathy with the small grocer man and he let us stay in business by selling us groceries that enabled us to be fairly competitive with the big stores. I will always take my hat off to Fred Meyer. I didn't follow in his footsteps and become the owner of a grocery chain, but I did...I was...I felt a successful grocer.

TM: How was his name spelled?

JB: It's...well, Fred and then Meyer, m-e-y-e-r. And of course that's the Fred Meyer chain of stores that's in the Portland...

TM: Oh, this is the Fred Meyer?

JB: Oh yes. Yes.

TM: Okay.

JB: He had... He owned, I think, grocery...that big warehouse in Spokane that my groceries came out of. He was a nice guy. Winnie and I were married in September of 1948 and we raised four children at the grocery store. I have a humorous little story to tell. Winnie and I were married September 12th, 1948 and on February the 8th of 1950 we had our first child. I had a lady come in the store right after David was born and she said, "Congratulations on the birth of a man-child." I said, "Oh, well, we're very proud and happy to have a son." She looked at me and she said, "And now when were you married?" I said, "September the 12th." I didn't tell her it was eighteen months before. She looked at me and said, "Well, I thought so." [laughs] So she went to her grave, I'm

sure, thinking what a rat I was. But that's besides the point. The thing I remember most about the grocery store is that to make it successful and to make it a paying concern we worked. Winnie and I worked long hard hours, often seventy or eighty hours a week. I think a lot of people don't realize how many hours we actually put in. One of the reasons that there were added hours is we worked a lot of the evenings. We sold custom beef, all the cutting and wrapping and beef for our customers was done after the store was closed.

TM: And you did that yourselves?

JB: Oh yeah. Yeah, I'm a meat cutter. I was a meat cutter. In the fall we also cut deer and elk. Basically, we did that for our customers. I didn't particularly enjoy that particular part of the meat cutting operation. Too often we spent as much time cleaning the carcasses up before we could cut them as we did cutting 'em. A lot of people just didn't know how to properly take care of their animals after it was shot. So that's one of the things I really don't miss. Probably the number one thing I do miss out of the grocery store are all the nice people that were our customers. On a scale of one to a hundred I'd guess that most of my customers were about ninety-eight. There were a few that were difficult, however, we must've given them good service because they didn't leave us, they were just difficult.

TM: I remember I was fortunate with my family to be your customer for a while. We moved into this neighborhood in 1975 and you were operating the store for at least another year and we then were customers of the Knowles for a while, too. But I can speak to that. I remember how good you and Winnie were with your customers and you had a real reputation for service and kindness to your customers. You really did.

JB: I mentioned the long hours and this is another thing that I'm sure most people don't realize. For years and years and years Winnie and I got up at two o'clock one day a week and unloaded a transport. That was... Winnie caught the cases. They were set on rollers and rolled into the store. I hand trucked 'em off to the rest of the store. That made a long day when we went to work there once a week at two o'clock in the morning. That went on until we closed the store...till we sold the store. One of the other things that I would like to at least comment on and that was some of the nice people that I had that worked for me over the number of years I was in business. Some of them were prominent in our community. Arnie Halmark who ran Halmark's furniture store and who's wife, Lorena, is still in town. Arnie worked for me for a number of years and was a wonderful man, a great guy and a lot of help to me. He was a worker. A man that worked for me who is also now gone was J. Donald Wilson. Don worked for me for a long time. A lady that I was particularly fond of that worked in my store was named Alberta Zickers. She just lived up the street three houses, Tom. She was close. And then a man named Bernard Gruis. Bernard was a meat cutter by trade and I had had some trouble with meat cutters, they didn't seem to stay at one job very long at a time. I finally decided it time for me to learn to cut my own meat. Bernard came in for a number of months after he got off work in the evening and we'd refill the meat case each evening and he taught me how to cut meat. And then his wife, Billie, who lives at Island City today, worked for me I think about seventeen or eighteen years. She was a wonderful person and a good employee.

TM: How's their last name spelled?

JB: Gruis. G-r-u-i-s. Billie is her nickname, I won't tell you what her real name is because she doesn't like it. [laughs]

TM: We won't give away any secrets.

JB: Incidentally, part of the information, Jerry is my nickname. My name is Joel. Joel C.... Joel Charles Bingner. There's a little family history there. I haven't... I had an older sister, but I was the only man-child. Grandmother Joel wanted the family name carried on one more generation so she asked my mother to name me Joel, which my mother did, but my mother always called me Jerry and I've been Jerry all my life. Let's see...

TM: So your mother's maiden name was Joel.

JB: Was Joel, yeah. Yeah. That's where the name of the store came from. Why don't we cut that for a minute, Tom, while I stop and think. [recording pause]

TM: We just wanted to see if we could do a little more...get a little more information about the store and the building itself. Just to clarify one thing, Jerry, on the Joel's Grocery building. You had said that the original store was in the house that's now next door to the west. Then after that the building was built?

JB: Yes. My mom and dad built the building that...the two-story building that's there. It's had several additions both east and west and then when I got out of the service in '46 and bought the building from my folks, and the business, I added the addition to the side that is the single story part of the business. That increased my square footage in floor space by about two-thirds and gave you a lot more ability to display merchandise, gave you room to put a lot more merchandise. We should probably also talk about the apartment upstairs 'cause that was a lovely place to live and to raise our four children. The apartment up there is much bigger than you realize. It has four bedrooms, a kitchen and a large breakfast room, has only one bath. The living room is sixteen by forty. It's almost big enough to be a bowling alley. It was a wonderful place for the kids to play, including football. I think I bought lots of glass shades for the lamp over the years as they got broken and tumbled to the floor. But we enjoyed living there. It was just a nice place and it was so handy to get up and eat breakfast and just go downstairs and I was ready to go to work. I didn't have to drive a mile or five miles or whatever. Work was right there. In thinking over the things that we did, Winnie used to at eleven-thirty or a quarter-to-twelve go upstairs, fix my lunch and she would bring it down. Then if we'd get busy maybe at two o'clock or two-thirty I'd get to go eat it. Sometimes I got to eat a hot meal, but not every day by a long ways. What a wonderful woman she was to raise four kids in that store and to cook meals for us, three meals a day, and then work in the store in the evenings. She also...she sewed her clothes and sewed both girls' clothes including wedding dresses when the girls were married. So...

TM: Go ahead. You were going to mention...

JB: I was going to mention that one of the things that I was very proud of in the store was it was the first grocery store in La Grande that put in the wine department that had other than the common things like Gallow wine and Ripple and so forth. We were very proud of the fact that we had a nice assortment of California wines and a small, but very good quality amount of French and German wine. I think we built quite a little business and we educated people other than ourselves on good wine, the difference between Ripple and a fine bottle of chardonnay. So we were proud of that.

TM: Yeah. You said that today one of your daughters is in...works in a winery...at a winery in Willamette Valley.

JB: Yes. My daughter Becky is the foreman on the Kristen Hill Vineyard. That's named for the vineyard owner's daughter Kristen. Becky is a teacher's aide, but she works in the vineyard most of the summer and frequently weekends. She hires the crew that harvests

the grapes and when the grapes...when the wine's ready to bottle she helps bottle and label the wine. If the owners there wish to take a weekend off she runs the tasting room. So Becky is very knowledgeable about wine as well.

TM: It sounds like you really...you and Winnie educated yourselves a lot about wine to do that, too.

JB: Truly we did. To sell premium grade wines you had to know what you were talkin' about. So Winnie and I both learned and our... The man that taught us the most about wine was Charles R. Cader, a prominent attorney. Charlie was a...I shouldn't use the word connoisseur, but he liked fine wine and he liked to share his knowledge and he did share information and enjoyment of drinking good wine with us as well as many other people. I owe Charlie a debt of gratitude. He's one of my favorite people. Always said if I ever murdered a man I wanted Charlie Cader to defend me. I don't think that should be recorded. [laugh] But anyway... Tom, I don't know just where we're gonna go right now.

TM: One other thing that we wanted to discuss today, or that you'd mentioned, Jerry, was some of the things that made neighborhood groceries different from their larger counterparts today. Joel's Grocery was noticed for some of these things and one of them certainly was home delivery. Do you want to talk about that just a little bit?

JB: You bet. That was just part of the service that as I grew up in the grocery store it was just one of the things we did. People would phone their orders in and we would pick out the merchandise that they wanted, put it in sacks or boxes and then it was delivered to the customers. That tradition, if you want to call it that, was started by my mother who before she and my father were married delivered groceries with a wagon and a mule. So the original delivery truck for Joel's Grocery was a wagon and a mule. One of the other things that we did was extend credit and that's something that sometimes got us in trouble, but it also built a very loyal base of customers. We issued credit usually monthly. When you came in groceries...what you got was just written down on a pad. At the end of the month you got a statement state that you owed so much money. Occasionally we had people that we'd help for one reason or another. I can recall people that were... Oh, a railroader, for instance, had gotten hurt on the job and we knew that sooner or later he would get a settlement from the railroad and I carried him for eighteen months he didn't pay his grocery bill. On the day they got his settlement I can remember him coming in the store, paying his bill in full and then he and his wife and Winnie and I dined out just that evening. He took us out for dinner to show his appreciation for the fact that we had helped him over what was a very difficult time. Those kind of intimate connections with your customers are certainly different from the commercial aspects of grocery stores today. I'm not sure that a neighborhood grocery store could handle that kind of competition today. I'm glad that I got out of the business when I did. Again, I should thank the community of La Grande that supported me for over thirty years. I'm truly grateful for the experience and for the loving customers that we had for so long. I still see them and I get lots of hugs even today, people that I knew many years ago.

TM: That's a wonderful memory and, Jerry, thanks very much for all your help today with this information. Thank you.