

Growing up in La Grande

WB: I'm Thomas Wade Booher and I was born August 13th, 1928. I lived on Highway Avenue which was Route 2 and is now 18th Street in La Grande.

I: How many were in your family?

WB: I had five brothers and sisters; three died at birth so there would've been nine of us all together.

I: How many brothers and how many sisters?

WB: Well, there were five sisters and three brothers.

I: Where did you stand in the family?

WB: I was the fourth one, right in the middle. There were three older sisters and one older brother (deceased), then myself. I had two younger sisters, one who lived and one who passed away and two younger brothers, one who passed away and one who lives.

Willow School

I: Did you go to Willow School?

WB: I went seven years to Willow School.

I: And what did you think about school?

WB: It's great. Just right.

Favorite Places to Eat

I: What were some of your favorite places to eat? Did you have hamburgers at the Log Cabin Grocery?

WB: Log Cabin Grocery, you bet. The best ice cream in town! When we got into high school you couldn't eat lunch with the grade school kids, so we'd take money to walk down main street to the ice cream shop and have sandwich and milkshake. Then they had a little store across the street, off of Fourth Street that would make hot dogs and hamburgers and we'd eat there sometimes. The Log Cabin Grocery was where the laundromat is now, on the corner of 18th and 20th. I remember Harvey Smith built that and run it for years and years and years. Good place, grocery store, a sandwich shop, ice cream, and milkshakes.

Vacations by train

I: Did your family take many vacations when you were a kid?

WB: Well, not too many, not till I was older. In the early '40s we took a vacation to Missouri one time.

I: Did you go by car or rail?

WB: By train. Everyone who worked for the railroad had a pass. My dad was an engineer at that time, and we had a family pass. Anyone who worked five years for the railroad, got a family pass. All of our names were on it and we could travel on the Union Pacific for free. Mother made sandwiches and lunch stuff, put it into a separate suitcase so we could eat on the train; we couldn't afford the dining car.

Dad worked for the railroad

I: What did your father do for an occupation?

WB: He was a yard engineer on the railroad. At that time a yard engineer worked in the yard limits for La Grande, Huntington and Reese. La Grande had a great big roundhouse, that was the division point between Reese and Huntington to the east.

They rebuilt and serviced engines. Back in the shop they'd tear the engines completely down and rebuild them as well as the boilers. The rip track was a huge. They had to switch engines around the clock. Every train came into town was switched: a new engine put on, a new caboose put on. The cars that went up the branch from La Grande through Elgin to Joseph, or came off the branch to go on the train were all switched around as well.

Games and Listening to the radio

I: What were some of the games you played when you were going to Willow School?

WB: Baseball, kickball, tag, hide and seek, blind man's bluff, the swings; I just loved recess and playing sports.

I: What did your family do for entertainment?

WB: We listened to the radio: Amos and Andy, I Love a Mystery, The Shadow Knows, The Creaking Door.

High School

- I: When you went into junior high, what did you think about going from a small school to a much larger school?
- WB: It was quite a change; it split up the old gang at Willow. It was different, but we got by.
- I: What were some of the courses and activities that you liked in High School?
- WB: I took agriculture for four years and went into the FFA class. I liked English. I wasn't crazy about math, but I should've been. I loved sports, football and basketball. The last couple years we had wrestling.
- I: Was there any particular position you played in football?
- WB: Yes, I was a tackle.
- I: Did you feel that you got an adequate education in high school to prepare you to work?
- WB: Yes, and if I didn't, it was my fault.

High School Harassment

- I: When you were in high school did upper-classmen ever harass you at any time?
- WB: They tried, but I outran them.
- I: What were they trying to do to you?
- WB: They never did catch me. I knew of other people who were taken out to Hot Lake or taken out in the valley someplace. They would take off their clothes and their shoes, and make them walk home. Most of the time they didn't want to get out of their cars. They would come up along beside me in a car and I would dodge down the alley or behind somebody's house to get away from them. I just didn't prowl around at night when those guys were out. Growing up in the east end of town I walked and I didn't get uptown much.
- I: Wasn't it about a mile uptown?
- WB: Yes, it was a good mile. You walked to high school, walked to junior high and walked to high school, or rode your bike. They didn't have school buses. The only school bus they had was the varsity bus that took football and basketball teams to different cities to play ball.

Jobs During High School

I: When you were going to high school what kind of jobs did you have?

WB: Mostly just summer jobs, working on farms around out in the valley.

I: When the war started were you still working on the farm?

WB: Yes, then I went over to Athena and worked in the peas every summer.

Farming

I: Do you think the farming's changed a lot since when you were young?

WB: Oh, absolutely! First job I ever had, I worked for Ray Crossen. He lived out there below the Grandview Cemetery; they were the first farm on Foothill Road. I got two dollars a day to put up hay; I drove the team. I rode my bicycle out there every morning. They fed me lunch. Just Ray and I would put up the hay and then I'd ride my bicycle home.

Then I got a job out by Hot Lake where I stayed on the farm; there I got two dollars a day and my room and board. When harvest season came, why, Dad came out to tell me that there was work over in Athena with my uncle. I think I got eight dollars a day for that job. I was what they call a header puncher on a threshing machine, a combine pulled by a big Caterpillar. I think the header was twenty to twenty-four feet long. My job was to lift that up and down according to the height of the wheat; you didn't want to pull in too much chaff, and you wanted to make sure you got all the heads of the wheat into the combine. That was a turning point for me. From then on I went to Athena every summer and worked in the peas and stayed right through to the wheat harvest. I came home just before school started.

I: When were you farming?

WB: All during the war.

I: When did you buy your first car?

WB: Not till I was probably a junior in high school, and it was a 1938 Chevy.

I: Did you hunt and fish during that time?

WB: Oh, I loved to hunt and fish, never missed a hunting season. I killed my first deer was when I was fourteen years old. Got my first elk was probably two years later when I was about sixteen. It helped to put meat on the table. We lived on about a five acre farm. We had cow, calf and sometimes a pig. In our garden we raised potatoes, carrots and other vegetables as well as a few apple trees. Deer and elk

meat in the fall helped the family by. We never went hungry like some people I knew at that time.

Working for the Railroad after High School

I: After you graduated from high school in 1947 what did you want to be?

WB: I really wanted to go into education and coach football, but I never even got close to that career. As soon as I graduated from high school, I went to work for the Union Pacific in the Bridge and Building department. My friend Dick Hamilton and I worked in the B&B department. We worked there until the middle of September when college started. I went two terms to college and ran out of money, so I went back to work for the railroad and the water service department. That took care of all the water pipes and heat. In 1947 we rebuilt and relined the powerhouse with firebrick so they could burn oil rather than coal.

It was in 1947 that the first diesel freight locomotive came through town. We were all standing on the platform watching it come in. It was something I never even envisioned, and it didn't look anything like I had thought it would look like. It just looked like a streamliner passenger engine.

Becoming a Railroad Fireman

I: When did you decide you wanted to be a railroad engineer?

WB: Well, I couldn't find a job anywhere. I got married in August of 1950 and I had worked for the mill, then I worked for gyppo mills around the valley. Also I worked on farms, worked in the service station and worked for Mt. Emily Lumber Mill for a while. I worked for the Forestry Department and in 1953, February or March, I got a chance to hire out at what they call a 'call voice'. They were clerks, weigh masters, and I worked there until June of '53. Then I transferred and became a fireman on the railroad. I was there for thirty-seven years.

I: When you changed over to a fireman, did that establish a start time for the railroad that all railroaders worked by?

WB: Yes. July 7, 1953 was my official hiring out date as a fireman. I worked thirteen years as a fireman at Hinkle and La Grande, Pendleton and Huntington. Hostling at Hinkle, La Grande and Huntington and in the yard at Hinkle and La Grande and Huntington. In the winter of '54 I was cut off for about two months and in the winter of '55 I was cut off two months. They went from a seven-day work week to a five-day work week and that put a lot of us back on; from that date on I was never cut off as far as not working. I was cut off the 'extra board', which was a premier job in most cases. You could work as much as you wanted and then not have to go back. Two different winters I went to Huntington to fire in the yard and then I wasn't cut back anymore.

I: All those year, did you work different times of the day and night? Could you ever depend on a holiday at home?

WB: Yes, unless you were on an assigned yard job. You worked any hour of the day and night, any weekend or holiday they wanted.

I: When you first started as a fireman how did the engineers treat you, was there a little hazing?

WB: No. There were some engineers that were just plain mean and others could care less. There were a good many of them that liked you and were enjoyable to work with.

I: There was a lot more to running an engine that just pulling the throttle. What were the things that you had to learn so that you became a good engineer?

WB: There were a lot of very, very strict rules, orders and regulations that you had to know by heart. Many have heard the expression 'you did things by the seat of your pants'. Well, here was one place where you felt the train by the seat of your pants. Just the way you topped over the hill and set your breaks, feeling the situation and if it didn't feel right you adjusted it. If you adjusted right, why, everything worked out fine. If you misjudged it, then you had little problems getting down or up the hill. Down the hill was the worst. Most anyone can run up the hill, it's when you top over and get everything gathered up and go down that hill. It's not straight down or straight up, because there are flat places in between. It was especially hard on the east end where you can't use your brakes all the way down; you would have to release them and then gather them up, doing it over and over again. It was the same way on the west end -- you would top over at Kamela and set your brakes, and going down through Meacham you would have to release them. Then when you get over the west end of Meacham, you really have to put them back on because that is a steep, much steeper grade than going from Kamela down, and it's longer.

I: Wasn't this one of the steepest grades on this route that Union Pacific had?

WB: Yes. We have a 2.2 grade on both east and west out of La Grande up and down. This is where ninety percent of the helpers were used. It was a short run and the maximum speed on the mountain was twenty, twenty-five miles an hour until you got down on the flat at Gibbon. Then you could release them and go track speed from there to Hinkle.

I: What was track speed?

WB: Well, it varied according to straight track or curved track. You had speed restrictions on curves and through towns that you had to abide by. At the east end, you had speed restrictions down the hill. When you got down to Durkee, you could go up to twenty-five to thirty miles an hour down through the Burnt River

Canyon. When you got out of Huntington, you could go about as fast as the engine could pull the train.

The Speed Board

I: As an engineer did you have to know how much weight you had in the train?

WB: It helped you to know what the tonnage was, whether you could make adjustments to set the brakes to slow down for curves. They said a quarter-of-a-mile to a half-a-mile before curves you had to use the speed board, that tells you what the maximum speed of your train was good for. It didn't take you long to realize and learn that speed board. If you waited too long to use the speed board to set your air to slow down, you were too late. You had to look down the track to know where you were, where that speed board was and you set the air accordingly.

Going out of La Grande eastbound, as soon as you got your head end over what we call the Pepsi-Cola crossing at the east end of La Grande, you could go as fast as your train was ordered to go, until you got to the curve at Hot Lake and then you had to go around that at a reduced speed. At the east end of Union Junction there was a very restrictive curve and you had to approach that at reduced speed. From then on way up the hill, you were at that speed because you couldn't go any faster.

I: Did you get this information from your dispatcher?

WB: No, you had a timetable that you lived by and that told you what your speeds were. These speed boards had a mark on them, freight, passenger and streamliner. A streamliner was on the top, followed by a passenger train and then a freight train.

A person could become an engineer a lot quicker than thirteen years, but we had a large number of fireman. Every train had a fireman at that time. It wasn't till about 1964, or 1965 that they started doing away with the fireman jobs. It was the same for the yard engineers who had firemen and their positions were reduced. When I was a yard engineer, I didn't have a fireman most of the time. Most of my railroading days I didn't have a fireman unless I was teaching one, giving one instruction to become an engineer. That's how they were taught to become an engineer -- they worked with one or many engineers, and what he did, rubbed off onto them, hopefully only the good points. Some of them picked up some bad points too.

I: When you were an engineer how did you hook up a train and communicate back and forth?

WB: Before we had radios, the head engineer on the train would set the pace. Of course you knew what the rules were; you would watch your gauges and the speedometer. When he started setting there and your gauges would show that you were putting more power into it because he was slowing down, then you would throttle down accordingly. You had gauges that showed like a hundred, two hundred, three hundred amps; four hundred, six hundred amps on your gauge or higher, you would throttle down. You would watch your air gauges so you could tell when he was setting air.

I: It must have become much easier later, when you got radios and you communicate back and forth?

WB: Oh, much easier. You generally knew what the length of train was, how far up ahead he was setting. You knew when he would set air, that he was either going to go in at Hilgard or go up the hill, so you didn't worry too much about. Out on the flat you watched it; if he set a lot of air and the speed of your train was coming down, you knew you were approaching, let's say Haines, and you would throttle down accordingly. Your speed into the passing tracks was twenty miles an hour over the switch. Then immediately when you got into that passing track, you came under a different rule: anything on that track, if it's a visible opposition to you, you had to stop short of it.

I: Later on when they had a number of units in the train, wasn't it all controlled by the front-end engineer?

WB: Yes. They had what they called a slave train or slave units. They would hook them in by radio to the train that you controlled from the head-end by your gauges. You had another box that set on your stand that told you what that unit, or what units behind you were doing. You could also set the throttle so that they were doing what you were doing. Sometimes you might work them a little harder to keep the slack up. When you were in dynamic braking -- electric braking -- going downhill you'd work them in dynamic braking also.

Dynamiting the Train

I: Is that what they call "dynamiting a train"?

WB: No. "Dynamiting a train" is going to emergency. Dynamic braking is on a diesel electric locomotive when you take your controls out of power, you go into dynamic braking. It reverses the current from the traction motors, makes them into electric generator, reverses the current, throws the current back up through dynamic grids and burns it off into the atmosphere.

Each wheel on a locomotive has a traction motor. The diesel engine in the locomotive turns a generator that makes electrical power; that turns that traction motor and allows the engine to move one way or another. They can run it

backwards the same speed as they can run it forwards. When you top over the hill, or want to go into dynamic braking you take it off of power. It makes the generator out of that traction motor. It is just like shifting down on a pick-up or car as you go downhill.

I: On a car you'd call it compression.

WB: Yes, and on the locomotive engine you call it dynamic braking.

Accidents on the Track

I: You told me sometimes one of the worst worries for an engineer was to see somebody along the tracks and be afraid you were going to hit them.

WB: Absolutely. If you got a train moving at any speed at all you go to emergency. That locks all the wheels in the train, and on the average, the train will go the length of itself before it can come to a stop. So when you see anyone on the side of the track, or a car on the crossing, there is nothing you can do. You can go to emergency, but you're still going to hit them. I went out the branch with an engine and three cars, hit a car out there on the crossing between La Grande and Island City. I went into emergency, but the engine and the three cars I had still went through beyond that crossing.

I: You told me one time over in Idaho there was a grandfather and a little boy that got hit and there was nothing that could be done.

WB: Fortunately, I wasn't on the train that hit the little boy. But there was an incident where some people were fishing off the Snake River bridge at Ontario. They can't outrun the train on the bridge. I've never seen anyone able to do that.

People in La Grande especially, talk about too many whistle blowings for crossings. All they have to do is get on that engine, ride it for a day and see what stupid people do around railroad tracks. I don't think they would ever complain again. If the enginner sees anything along the track, there's a prescribed whistle that he has to blow according to state and railroad law. It's a long, two shorts, and a long. That tells you to get the crap out of the way because I'm coming and there's nothing I can do about it.

Unfortunately, I have hit cars and I've hit people. That's a most sickening feeling that there ever was, to hit an individual or a car. There is not a thing you can do about it. You can't swerve and you can't stop until that train's ready to. You go to emergency and that train will go till it's ready to stop.

I: How long are some of these trains?

WB: Oh, most trains out here now are a mile long, sometimes a mile-and-a-half to two miles long.

Railroad Unions

I: When you were a fireman engineer were there times or incidents when things happened to other employees and you needed to go to the officials and work things out?

WB: Back then we had three union organizations on the railroad; we had a firemen's organization, an engineers' organization, and a trainmen's organization. Right off, I was involved with the firemen's organization -- was the mileage man for at least ten to twelve years. When I went into the engineers', I took over the same job as the local chairman. I represented different employees who got either in trouble or called up on the carpet by the company. They had to have an investigation, supposedly to try to find out the truth of what happened. But a big share of the time it was a one-way street; the company thought the individual was at fault. I was involved in that position until I retired.

I: How often were men tested on rules and what happened if they failed?

Railroad Examinations

WB: Every two years you were tested. Demerits are time off, what they call a discharge. They'd never fire you permanently unless you did something very, very gross. We had to take a very strict rules examination. We had to take three examinations: mechanical, air brakes and rules. Each examination had three hundred to a couple thousand questions. You had to take it orally, in a class discussion and in written section. You had to be perfect. In other words, in the oral section, you couldn't just hem and haw around and guess at a question. The instructor knew the answer when he asked you the question; you better give him the answer back the way it was in the book. When in the written part, it had to be letter perfect with the punctuation marks in the proper place, i's dotted and the t's crossed.

I never had that much of a problem, but I do know guys who got marked down for not having the correct punctuation. We'd take three fireman in at a time, each class had three, and it would take all day. You didn't do it all at one time however. You would take the mechanical part one time, and then so many months later you'd take the air. After so many months, you would take the rules. After you got those all completed, you got your card and then you were an engineer. But you didn't get a date on the board until you went out, or someone below you went out on a trip as an engineer. Then you got your date.

Railroad Job Insurance

I: Do all railroaders carry job insurance?

WB: All railroaders carry job insurance. You couldn't live with unemployment so you'd carry job insurance. Most men carried enough job insurance to cover them for a full day's wages. You didn't want to lose any money. It was a good job, enough to earn a living, buy your own home, a car, to raise a family, and a very good retirement. Back then I enjoyed going to work.

They used to have the call boys, (crew callers) here in La Grande. The dispatchers were here in La Grande as well. Lots of times the guys would be waiting to get called throughout the day, they would go down to the depot and go into the call boys room to check the board to see where they stood on the extra board. There were always three or four, half-a-dozen guys in there and you'd visit with them. When they moved the dispatchers and the call boys to Portland, you were only a number on the telephone. They would call you by telephone and you would go to work. There was someone at the station to give you the orders and what train you were taking. This process on the phone took the personality out of the job.

A few years later, they moved the call boys and the dispatchers to Salt Lake City and it was just the same as it was in Portland, you were just a telephone number. Before I retired, the jobs went to Omaha (corporate headquarters), and everything was run out of there by computer. They learned your voice and who you were, of course, but they didn't know you by sight. When those boys were here in La Grande, all you had between you and the call boy was a window pane. You could see them, talk to them, visit with them, and joke with them. They were neighbors; they lived in the same community you lived in. They knew you and your family. I knew all the call boys, some personally and others by reputation. When they went to Portland, Salt Lake and Omaha you didn't know them, only the sound of their voice.

It was a lot easier over the telephone to tell a guy you can't lay off than it was looking through a three-foot glass window. That was always our contention. We didn't like it, but that's the way it was. Back then if you were not at home they had to come to your house to get you. If you didn't answer your phone they had to come to the house. Some men didn't have phones for that reason. They wanted them to come out and call them. When they moved to Portland, Salt Lake and Omaha, then you had to have a phone and everything was done over the telephone.

I: How many hours did you have after you were called to go to work?

WB: You had an hour to an hour-and-a-half. Most of the time it was hour-and-a-half to get prepared, to be down there ready to go out on that train. They always had the crews called in such a manner that they would be there waiting for the train to come in, instead of the train setting there waiting for the crew to show up.

I: Did you ever work on the branch line?

WB: I worked up the branch line both as a fireman and as a signed engineer. The branch was a good run. I loved to work on the branch. It wasn't like the main line; it was slow and the scenery was tremendous. You could see all kinds of game and activities on the branch line. It was an all-day job; we would take ten or twelve hours going up and come home in six or eight hours. We always ran faster coming home than we did going up.

In 1973 when the call boys and dispatchers moved from La Grande, our crews went from La Grande to Nampa; that was the premier job. You got more time at home by working that job, because it was a hundred-and-eighty miles from La Grande to Nampa and it's only a hundred-and-six from La Grande to Hinkle. So you could make a round trip from La Grande to Nampa and get two to three days off before your turn was up to go back out again. I liked that very much. One of the prettiest things I ever saw in my life was coming from Nampa to La Grande, topping over Telocaset, coming down through Crook's and around Pyle's Canyon. It would be in the early morning and sun was up and bright. Either in the summer when everything was green and beautiful, or in the winter when everything was covered with snow, I've never seen a more beautiful valley to come into when you make that turn out of Pyle's Canyon over to Union Junction and see the Grande Ronde Valley. Coming down from Kamela, from the west into the Grande Ronde Valley, you're in the canyon all the way and you don't get to see the valley till you're right out in it.

I: What was your relationship with some of the other men on the railroad, the section men or the maintainers?

WB: I didn't really have a working relationship with them. I didn't know them by name but I knew a lot of them by sight. I had a lot of respect for the section man because I knew that if he didn't do his job properly, I could be in a wreck out there and possibly get killed or do a lot of damage to the cars and engines. I don't know if others felt that way, but I did. I had a lot of respect for the work that the section man did. The maintainers kept the signals going because if they didn't keep the signals going, we couldn't move. All our work was done by signals: for red you stopped, green you went through, and yellow you were cautious.

Hilgard Logger

I: Had they already pulled off the Mt. Emily Lumber Company line by the time you started?

WB: No, it was running when I first hired out. It would make a turn-around they called the Hilgard Logger. You would call an extra crew to go up to Hilgard, take the

empties or flats up. The Mt. Emily Lumber Company train would come down to Hilgard, push their loads out on the Y. Then you would pick them up. They would reach in, take the empties and go back up to Mt. Emily Lumber Company.

I: Where did that Y cross the highway there?

WB: It crossed the highway there at Five Points Creek, the tail of the Y would go across the highway. It is all covered up with curb on the freeway now. It came in and crossed the Grande Ronde River.

I: How many hours can an engineer run before he has to stop the train and be replaced?

WB: When I first hired out he could work sixteen hours and then he had to have twelve hours rest. In later years they changed it, so you could work twelve hours and have ten hours rest. However, you could tie up short five minutes off of that twelve hours, make it eleven-fifty-five, and go back out in eight hours. Otherwise you had to have a full ten hours rest.

I: How many times did you go right up to the time limit?

WB: Oh, many times, many times. Many times going east, I'd go dead at Ontario and they would have to come pick us up and take us into Nampa. Other times you would go down to Durkee, hook into a train and help it back. You couldn't go into Huntington because if you went into Huntington, they had helpers out of Huntington then, they'd have to tie you up and run a Huntington crew out. If you ran out of a helper crew out of La Grande, why, you could go down to Lime and hook into a train and come back.

I: In the early days wasn't there a regular helper station to Telocaset and then to Kamela?

WB: Yes, there was. But, when I hired out they had done away with the Telocaset and the Kamela helper stations; they ran them all out of La Grande. Also they had a helper in Huntington but none anywhere else. When we would be going west, we'd run down to Reese with Pendleton and help trains back to La Grande.

I: In your later years, you would like to run east from La Grande to Nampa, that was an assigned area. If you signed up to go east that's where you went, if you signed up to go west then you went from La Grande to Hinkle.

WB: Yes. When I was on to pull freight, why, you either ran from La Grande to Hinkle or you worked from La Grande to Nampa or Huntington. Before they started running to Nampa, all our boards ran out of La Grande, and if they wanted a train east and it was your turn you went east. If they wanted a train west and it was your turn you went west; we intermingled and went each direction. But when

they went to Nampa, they had to bring over a half of the crews on the east end from Idaho. These crews came out of Glenn's Ferry and they moved the Nampa.

I: It seems that there was about as half as many jobs as there had been running east to Nampa.

WB: Yes, that's true. I liked the east end since you got a better run. You would make better money and didn't have to work as long. You would have to work ten or twelve hours every trip over and that much back, when you worked the west end. Many times if you caught a fast train, you could be in Nampa in five hours. If you caught a slow one you could be over there in ten or twelve hours.

Railroad Engines and their sizes

I: What were the engines like?

WB: Yes. When I first went to work on the railroad, they still had steam engines. On most their runs they used them in the helper service. I've heard a lot of guys down through the years say, "oh, the good old times of the steam engine". Well, I don't recall of any good time on a steam engine. You either froze in the wintertime or cooked in the summertime. One side would be cooking and the other side would be freezing. You had to have a crew on each engine on a steam engine. On a diesel, the same engineer could hook up five or six units together. They would pull more freight. Like I said earlier, most of our trains out here are at least a mile to a mile-and-a-half or sometimes two miles long. They extended a lot of passing tracks, made them longer. When I was still working they had some trains that wouldn't fit some of the passing tracks.

I: What were the sizes of some of the engines when you first went to work?

WB: They were much smaller than they are now. You had a lot of 100's and 400's and now they are up to the 6900's and 7000's.

I: Tell me about the 9000 Indian engine they had down at Huntington, that wouldn't go around the curves up in this area.

WB: That was a steam engine. They had some of those, what they called "the big boys" that would come in, and they couldn't go around the curves. When I first hired out, the diesel engines, (freight engines) we had would have two traction motors under each end. Now they have three and four traction motors under each end. Twenty years ago, they developed a huge engine, it was a 6900 series, and it had two diesel engines on the same chassis, back to back and they had four traction motors under each end. They were long. They worked up here, but they were mainly for a high-speed stretches. They weren't really efficient in the mountains.

The Union Pacific had a policy that if they bought something they would work it wherever in the hell they wanted to work it. They told them way at the beginning, not to mix a 100 series, 200 series, 400 series, 500 series engines, that they worked better in their own series. Some railroads would have a three unit set and would just disconnect them, and hook them onto another engine. Union Pacific would not do that. I worked with a 200 series and a 400 series, a 500 series all in the same unit. Their horsepower was different. Way back at the beginning the 400's was very powerful engine. The 300 or 500 series engine on each side of them would spin trying to keep up with those 400's. They were just a different series altogether. But the Union Pacific made it work. They would not set a four-unit set out, because one engine had a little problem. They would just unhook it and hook another one on in its place and go ahead and run.

I: Do you ever envision the time that they'll run through La Grande, doing away with La Grande as a division point?

WB: They could do it now if the railroad wanted to put the time and money into it. My feeling is that, as long as they run the big, long, heavy trains and they don't have enough passing tracks, they won't. But if they would double track the mountain so that you wouldn't have to go into a passing track and wait for a train to come up the hill from the other side, set in there thirty minutes or an hour waiting for a train, they could run from Nampa to Hinkle. I don't think that you're going to see that happening, because it is going to cost a tremendous amount of money to double track the mountain.

I: You might say that saves La Grande because there's quite a large payroll that comes.

WB: A huge payroll. Earlier, you had different situations on the railroad. You had the roundhouse and you had the back track. I remember in 1947 and 1948 when I worked, even after I hired out as a fireman and would hostel engines in and out of the roundhouse, there were almost three hundred men working in the roundhouse and the back shop. Now there is nothing. You can't even tell where the back shop or the roundhouse was.

At one time they had twenty helper crews out of La Grande. They had fifteen to twenty at Kamela, at the roundhouse and turntable, now there isn't anything at Kamela. You don't have any helper crews. You used to have five or six helper crews at Huntington and now they go through Huntington like it's not even there. So, the railroad has changed tremendously. It's not the same railroad.

I: There's something fascinating about railroad and a big engine pulling a large train.

WB: All the years I worked on the railroad you go along the highway and wave at a car and it waved back or they'd honk their horn and wave at you first.

My dad hired out on the railroad as a yard fireman in the fall of 1923 and was promoted to yard engineer in 1928, the year I was born. I hired out on the railroad in the summer of 1953 and was promoted to engineer in the summer of 1966. There were only five years difference between my dad's hiring out and his becoming an engineer while there was thirteen years difference between my hiring out and becoming an engineer.

Consolidation at the Railroad

In 1950 they consolidated the yard fireman and the road fireman. Prior to that you either hired out as yard fireman or as a road fireman. You were a yard engineer or a road fireman depending on which branch you were hired on. In 1950 they consolidated the road and the yard fireman, and it was in 1963 or 1964, when they consolidated the engineers from the yard and the road. Everything hinged on your fireman's date. You couldn't promote one man ahead of another man because of his date. Consequently, they made it retroactive so every road engineer and every yard engineer got a firing date as of 1950. So the road men got a yard firing date as 1950 and the yard engineers got a road date 1950. So all of us that hired out after 1950 fell in behind those gentlemen instead of them falling in from their date in 1964 they went back to 1950. So that set us all back a little bit, too.

You had to retire or quit before you got to move up. One thing that was unique, I did fire for my dad. You had stamps that had your initials, your last name and p-number that you stamped on all your time slips. That's how you got paid. My dad's initials was T. H. Booher, p-number 1028. Thirty years later my initials were T. W. Booher p-1029. I thought that was quite fascinating to me that my dad's number and my number after thirty years difference in hiring out was one number off. But the railroad never mixed it up. I never got any part of his check or he never got any part of my check. One number different in thirty years. Of course all of the numbers were given alphabetically.

I: What was payday like at the freight house?

WB: When we hired out they had the old freight house down there about where the old hotel was built at Jefferson and Chestnut, at the west end of the depot. I knew guys that worked in there and they knew me since I was a little kid. When I went to get my check, I had to give them my social security number every time before they'd give me my check. Clint Thatcher, who had known me from the time I was born, would not give me my check until I given him my social security number. They quit doing that and all those gentlemen retired, the freight house was torn down, they moved everything into the depot and those guys weren't so particular, they'd just give you your check.

The great thing that happened next, was direct deposit, the railroad company would deposit the check in my bank account. My nephew hired out after I did and he worked on the railroad, was a fireman and an engineer, and he fired for my dad quite a few years. I had an uncle on my mother's side that was a hostler for the Union Pacific down around Las Vegas. Back in those days you had hostlers that worked for the railroad that were not fireman.

Hostlers

I: What did hostlers do?

WB: Hostlers moved the engines in and out of the roundhouse and spotted it for fuel. Before I hired out they did away with the hostlers who went on to become firemen; they gave them a date and they became a firemen. They also had hostler helpers. We never had to touch a fuel hose or water or anything, the hostler helpers did all that. All we did is move the engines. If you were a hostler, you would run the engine; if you were a helper you threw the switches to move the engines from one track to another like a brakeman in the yard. I fired for John Mulligan here in La Grande for several years when I had enough seniority. That was a day job. You could work five days a week, eight hours a day so long as you could hold the job and somebody didn't bump you off. There were regular hours.

I: Did you always work with the same engineers when you were a fireman?

WB: Yes, I did. First firing job I got was with Doug Wilson and then I went to work with Bob McClay for two or three years. Then I went to work for Ted Bean and worked with him for four years till I got promoted. Then I didn't have a regular man because I worked off the extra board, or I was out running off the extra board myself. Sometimes after you were promoted and you were on a regular firing job, they would run out of extra engineers. They would just reach out and tell you, you were going to go to work as an engineer, and then come back to your firing job. They were good engineers. Like I said earlier, there were some that were scoundrels, but all-in-all you loved to work with the good ones and you didn't particular care to work with the others.

The Branch Line

I: When you were a kid did you ever take the branch and go up fishing at Looking Glass?

WB: No, I never did. When I was firing, I carried them. We would pick a guy up and take him up there, let him off, pick him up when you come back. Back when I first hired out, you'd go up and back on the branch the same day by a little old steam engine. Paul Parker was the engineer. Now, those guys moved. When they went to diesel, they put two crews on the line. We'd go up one day, lay-over, and come back the next and meet the other guy going up wherever it was

convenient. We stayed at the old hotel at Joseph, and sometimes they had a couple of outfit cars that the crews could stay in. Then when I was up there as an engineer, we stayed at the motel at Joseph. That's quite a little walk to go in there in the middle of the night with the snow a couple feet deep. By that time of night, the restaurants weren't generally open, so we would stop at Enterprise on the way up and eat our dinner meal. There was a place open in Joseph for breakfast every morning. Coming back we would stop sometimes at Wallowa for lunch or a piece of pie, and then come on home. Those were the good old days.

School Board

I: During the time you were working for the railroad you were on the school board. Can you tell us a little about that?

WB: I served on the school board about 6 years beginning in 1969. I just did my best for the community and the children. I was on the board at the time we had a bond measure to pay for an addition to the high school, build a new middle school, and build a new Island City grade school. It was all on the same bond levy. I was proud to be a part of that.

Shriner

I: Tell me about other community activities you were involved in.

WB: I was an Elk, also became a Mason and eventually a Shriner. I was very active with the Shriners; I put in twelve years as the West team manager for the East-West Shrine Football Game. We played a few years in Pendleton and the rest since then have been in Baker, Oregon.

I've been through that Shriner's Hospital about twelve times. We would meet the teams in Portland and take them to the Shriner Hospital, load them on busses and bring them to La Grande. We spent two weeks with them every summer.

Going through that hospital no one comes out with a dry eye. Even after being in it ten or twelve times myself, I can't come out with a dry eye. But it's not from the pitiful children, it's just that I've never seen a child unhappy or cry.

The children are always glad to see you; they want you to put your name on their cast. They're very, very appreciative of everything that the ball players do for them as well as the Shriners. I think it is tremendous that the Shriners Hospital does not charge one penny for any care of a child in their hospitals. There are twenty-three hospitals throughout the United States and three burn institutions. The doctors learn a lot about burns and other childhood injuries; the Shriner Hospitals are always striving to do better, to test new and better medical methods and it is all for children.

Shriners Caravan

I: Tell us a little about the Shrine Caravan.

WB: For about ten or twelve years a food caravan starts in Fruitland, Idaho in the wee hours of the morning and comes through Ontario, Baker, La Grande, and Pendleton. Shriners are involved, all the way from Fruitland to Portland. Throughout the fall of the year, we gather food -- non-perishables and some perishables because they can go down in one day and get put the perishables into a freezing unit. I've been there when there has been thirty, forty vehicles in a line that end up at the Shriners' Hospital in Portland, holding thousands and thousand of dollars worth of food stuffs. There are some trucks that have a tremendous amount of perishables that are given to one of the other children's hospitals in Portland like Doernbecker; nothing is wasted.

Elks

WB: One other event I remember is taking my children down to the Elks to get their Christmas candy sack. It was a much bigger event then it is now. They had the Christmas tree in the middle of the intersection at Depot and Washington streets which they were blocked off. It was passing out candy time; the children would line up for blocks to go get their sack of candy. Now we only do a hundred-and-thirty or so sacks; we have to find children to give it to them. They don't seem to come around anymore.

Changes in La Grande

I: Do think La Grande had changed much in the years you have lived here?

WB: Basically, La Grande hasn't changed as much as people like to think it's changed. I've always loved La Grande; it's a small community. I used to think I knew everybody in town and now I don't even know two people on the street. As I recall when I was a kid growing up, La Grande was about 8,000 and now we're up to about 13,000. I think a lot of that is on account of the city limits have changed, more than an influx of people.

The downtown has changed, there are not as many merchants downtown as there were when I was growing up. That's sad because there's a lack of communication; I used to visit with lots of people when I shopped at the different merchants downtown. There are so few places in town you don't stop anymore. There used to be a Montgomery Wards, a Sears and, of course, J. C. Penney's has been there as long as I can remember. You had a shoe store in the same block as M. J. Goss; you had three clothing stores for men and several for women.

The banks came in and changed a lot of the way the town looks. I think one of the saddest things that ever happened in my lifetime, was when they sold the Sacagawea Hotel, tore it down, and made into a bank. The Sacagawea Hotel was one of the cornerstones of the community. They said it was rickety and was going to fall down. I laughed when they tore it down; they had to have a Caterpillar up on the fourth floor to help knock down the building. It wasn't rickety!

I: They tore it down floor by floor?

WB: Yes they did. Then there was the Zuber Hall for dancing and you had Payless up on Main Street. On their second floor before the Second World War, the National Guard used to practice and meet. Payless was the very first store in the chain and now there isn't a Payless anymore.

Friends left from High School

I: How many of your friends are around that went to high school with you?

WB: Most of them have moved. There was a handful that stayed and some who came back after they retired. By and large, the majority of the graduates from La Grande High School had to go somewhere else to find employment. I was fortunate enough to find it on the railroad. There were a few out of our class that went to the railroad, but not very many. The railroad and the mills were the employment hub of La Grande.

I: Did you notice any changes in the community during that time?

Changes after World War II

WB: I really don't know if the war changed anyone. I am sure things would've been different, I guess it made us all grow up faster, be more responsible. As high school graduates in '47, we were quite upset. The first couple of years at college is supposed to be fun, easy and big times had by all. When we got into college, all the veterans were coming back from the war, wanting an education, and they set the standards higher than what we had anticipated. It was a little rougher than what we expected.

I: We did have the Air Cadets living in the Sacagawea Hotel going to Eastern College during the war and taking flying lessons at the airport.

WB: After they graduated, they went to flying school in Texas. Most of them came back to Pendleton and Walla Walla where there was an airbase for the Air Force during the war. One thing I do remember were the boys that went over to Tokyo for General Doolittle, many of them trained at Pendleton and Walla Walla.

Eastern Oregon University

WB: I think the biggest change in the community has been the college; back in the early years, if they had four hundred students they were counting the janitors. I remember in high school football and basketball, we used to play the college in scrimmage games. Two-thirds of our graduating class went to Eastern, and Eastern at that time was about seven hundred students. Now I believe, they have three thousand students. The campus is a lot bigger than it was. I used to play in the old Quinn Coliseum. The neighborhood kids used to sneak into Quinn Coliseum through the dressing rooms and play basketball when nobody was supposed to be around.

Back when we were in school, we played at what is now the middle school soccer field. That was a premier football field in Eastern Oregon. It was much better than Pendleton's or Baker. The college played their games there, what teams they could muster up during the war and right after the war. A little later they built an athletic field down east of Quinn Coliseum which was a farce as far as I'm concerned. Around La Grande if you build a football field, you want it to run north and south with your bleachers on the west side because the wind comes fiercely down Deal Canyon. The field that the college built east of Quinn Coliseum was laid east and west. A lot of people didn't know it, but one end of the field was about six feet lower than the other end of the field. It made a difference which end of the field you were on. It was easier to run downhill than it was uphill. They finally got their act together and built a nice stadium and track just south of Quinn Coliseum. The baseball diamond, Snowflake Field, was a joke for the whole league; you look at home plate, it's uphill from second base or anywhere else in the field.

Reflections

WB: Looking back, I had a good a life. Yes, there are things I would've changed. I didn't think I needed all this sophisticated education. In the high school, I took what was required of me for English, and was tickled to death to get out of any more than that. I would encourage anyone to get all the English and all the math they can get, because you don't think that on the farm or on the railroad you need it. But you work with figures and you need the ability to express yourself especially in this day and age. I found very early after graduating from high school, that I needed it what I hadn't taken. Fortunately, I belonged to some organizations and learned how to express myself.

The passenger trains were elegant. I thought one of the biggest, saddest things they ever did, was to eliminate the passenger trains. The streamliner was absolute elegant way to travel. If the railroads had the passenger train business back today they could make a profit. Amtrak can't make a profit, never will be able to make a profit because there is too much management and overhead. Of course they've

to pay the railroad so much for the right to travel on their track, but again, it's a bureaucracy, the government got involved with Amtrak. They used to have four passenger trains a day each way in and out of La Grande. The Trains carried the mail and there was the Railroad Express Company. I don't think there would be a UPS if they still had the Railroad Express Company.

When the trains came in to La Grande they had mail, freight and Railway Express. If you had freight, you'd take it to the west end of the depot for the Railway Express. All automobiles were shipped in freight cars. They'd double-deck them. Later, they came out with auto racks that could haul longer cars, also with double decks.