

Narrator: Alvin Campbell

Interviewer: John Turner

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AC: Alvin Campbell, November the 10th, 1919.

I: And where were you born?

AC: La Grande.

I: So you've lived here all your life?

AC: Yeah. All except when I was in the service.

I: When you were growing up, what school did you attend?

AC: I went to a little country school out north of Island City about four miles.

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

AC: Oh, we played baseball; played hockey with a tin can; got one of my front teeth knocked out doing that. [laughs]

I: Was that on the ice?

AC: No, just out in the rocks and the dirt--get another kid with good gloves and see who could knock it the furthest the quickest.

I: How many years did you go to the Iowa School?

AC: Six years there. And then we lived over by Alicel; the folks moved to farm over there and I went over there I think two years. But I finished my 8th grade at Iowa School.

I: When you were going to school, did you have any jobs that you did?

AC: Yeah, we lived out there on a farm; and ya never run outta work. Always had chores to do. One of the things I had to do every night when I got home was get on a saddle horse and go up on the mountain and look for cows. Then

they'd milk 'em.

I: About how many cows you think you had?

AC: Oh, we probably had 15 or 20 cows. We probably milked about 6 or 7 altogether.

I: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

AC: Yeah. I had two brothers and three sisters. There were six of us. I was the youngest boy.

I: What did you want to be when you got out of high school?

AC: I had my head set on ... I was gonna go to college and go into the Forest Service work. Didn't make it.

I: About what year was that?

AC: Well, probably in 1935.

I: And that was because of the Depression that you weren't able to go on to school?

AC: We was living at Alicel when the Depression--right in the middle of it. When we planted 15 acres of spuds and you would get a Grade A gunnysack full of potatoes, you could only get 25 cents for them. Dad, he'd come to town and go house to house trying to sell potatoes for 25 cents a sack. Couldn't sell them so we took them in and then we'd feed them to hogs.

I: Soon there was a better market for the hogs.

AC: Yeah. Well, they didn't sell for very much either. We always had hogs and mother always had a bunch of chickens; sold the eggs. Had a little band of sheep, milked cows.

I: When did you get your first car?

AC: My first car was a Model A Ford that I traded 12 cord of apple wood to Perkins, the car dealer. I think he sold Dodges, but he had this Ford in there and he wanted some apple wood. So my brother and I cut down about 40 acres of apple trees that winter before. My brother, he'd got married, and dhe traded his wood for groceries. I traded mine for a Model A Ford--'29 Ford.

I: And you had a lot of fun with the Ford?

AC: Yeah, that was my pride and joy. Metallic gray with red wheels, I really thought I had something.

I: Well what was the first job that you had outside the family farm?

AC: Well, I think the first job I had was working with Mountain States Construction Company. They contracted a road built from Sanderson Springs over the hill to the Tollgate road. And they went right up a big thorn draw; and they hired a bunch of local farmers out there and I was the only one from LaGrande that drove out there. And they chopped those thorn brush down and burned them on the way. Oh they was about 20 foot tall and they'd chop them off and drag them apart, cut them up and burn them.

I: Do you remember about how much you got paid for ...

AC: Oh, probably around 50 cents an hour because later on I worked for Mt. Emily Lumber Company; I worked on the green chain down there and I think it was 50 cents an hour I got on the green chain. I was making big money at 4 bucks a day.

I: How long did you work for Mt. Emily then?

AC: I worked there for ten years. I worked five years before the war and then they was wanting railroaders, and I went on the railroad. Quit Mt. Emily after five years and went on the railroad. Then worked there for about two years and then I was drafted in the service. I went in the Camp Roberts, trained in the infantry, and I went over to the Philippines. Went through the 43rd infantry division. I was in the service a total of about a year and a half. But I didn't stay in one place very long--15 weeks in training in Camp Roberts and went overseas. In the later part of that campaign there Luzon. And I got a bronze star.

I: Where'd you go from Luzon?

AC: War ended and they rushed us into Japan. Were there two weeks on my way home.

I: When you worked for the railroad, what did you do?

AC: I was a brakeman.

I: In those days they had cabooses.

AC: Yeah, we lived on a caboose. Had an icebox on there and we took our groceries and lived right on there while we were gone.

I: There was a conductor, and how many brakemen?

AC: Three brakeman: flagman, swing brakeman, and a head brakeman.

I: And what was the flagman's job?

AC: Well, in those days you had train signals. You run a red block and the train had to stop and you couldn't pass it. Then you had to whistle out a flagman--the one on the rear; he'd go out about a half a mile and set the red fusee [i.e. , a flare] and then he'd go out a mile, if you'd stop long enough, and clamp two torpedoes [i.e., explosive devices] and a fusee and then walk back to the half-mile point and wait till you whistled him in.

I: The torpedo was like a big firecracker when the train would go over it?

AC: The thing was flat and probably as thick as a thin biscuit. It had a spring on each side of it that clamped right on the rail. You'd put them, if I remember right, about a hundred feet apart.

I: And it would make a loud exploding noise when the train went over it.

AC: It'd make a racket.

I: And then a fusee was kind of like a roman candle only longer.

AC: Yeah, they burnt for quite a while.

I: You said there was the flagman. What was his job?

AC: When the train was being made up in the yard before you left your terminal, his job was to go up the train and get all the numbers and the light weight of each car--whatever it was, gondola, flat car, or what. He'd get all this for the conductor; he'd have to make out the weigh bills and other things in the caboose while he was traveling. Then when the train pulled out, the flagman and the swing brakeman watched the trains pass and made sure all the brakes were off the wheels and wasn't any draggin'. If there was, they'd have to run along and pull the bleeder out and bleed the air off of 'em until they got 'em running good.

I: That would hold the train back.

AC: Yeah. Then the head brakeman was up there riding on the engine with the engineer and the fireman. He'd line all the switches if they met another train; he'd have to line the switches.

I: That was before they had central train control, or CTC as they called it.

AC: Right. They had the operators, who had bamboo sticks formed like a loop with a long end on one end. They had train orders they'd pass the clip on that thing and they'd hold it up and the engineer or fireman would stick his arm through that and get the train orders off of it and then throw the stick back out the window.

I: So that way they knew what trains were coming and what you were supposed to do next.

AC: Right.

I: When you got back from the service and got discharged, what did you do next?

AC: I went back to work for the railroad. I was there when I went in the service. I really wasn't cut out to be a railroader, I guess. I liked the job but I didn't like the hours you had to work. The railroad had a board where, if you wanted off, you had to get laid off. Then they'd take your card and pull it out of the line and put it over on the lay-off board. They're manned 24 hours a day. They could call whenever they needed ya and you was gone. And when I got out of the service I'd been gone for a while. And I got out just before Christmas and when I got back to the states, I got home just in time that they give me. I had 40 days of furlough coming to me. I got home just in time; my brothers took me elk hunting with 'em. Come out of that hot country over there and just about froze to death. [laughter] Another thing, I'd taken Adabrane [?] over there in the Philippines till I turned yellow.

I: And that was for what?

AC: Quinine-type drug to keep you from getting malaria, I guess. But I didn't want that, so if I missed one day, I'd take two the next one. My socks had even turned orange. Got up here elk hunting and the guys laughed at me cause all their faces were rosy red and mine was yellow. [laughter] Looked like a Chinaman. Anyway, I got home and then I had to go back to Ft. Lewis and get discharged. Must have been right after the first of December because I wanted to go back to work so I'd have a check coming right away at the first of the next year. I worked for two or three weeks. Then Christmas come along and I went in and asked them to pull me off the board for

Christmas 'cause I wanted to be home and I had to get that straightened out. Then they started complaining like they did before I went in the service. You had to have a day off. It was like pulling teeth to get off. After the service there, they did that and I just give 'em my key and I quit. I went back to Mt. Emily Lumber Co. I went right back over there and they put me right to work. I was there for five more years.

I: What did you do at Mt. Emily?

AC: The last five years, I kind of did about everything. I drove equipment, run a cat [i.e., tractor], pushed logs off, and handled all the fuel out there. They had a big loader that went on the front of it. Kept all the roads bladed down. I did about everything there was to do out there in that sawmill before I quit there. But they went on a strike, and they was off about two weeks for this fella that they let go. And they finally got his job back and then he quit. But during this strike I went up there looking at caterpillars up there at Inland Machinery. Walked in there and they wanted to give me a job, so I told them, "I had a job but they're on strike down there." They said, "Come in here and work while the strike's going on; then you can go back out there. You ought to." So I stayed there and they talked me into quitting my job at the mill and staying there. So I worked cats for three years; then they had a slump in business and laid off five mechanics and I was the youngest one in the part crew, so I got laid off. They thought this thing would just last a few days and we'd all be back to work. But it didn't work out that way. So I finally went to work for the county.

I: There was a time that you told me that you worked for the Blue Mountain Creamery. What period of time was that?

AC: That time was when I was first married--I think probably the first winter that I was married. I was looking for any kind of job I could get. I wasn't particular what I got as long as I worked. I helped the butter maker put butter out of the vats. And another job I had there was piling ice. They'd stack those big blocks of ice clear up to the ceiling in the freezing room. It would take both of us to lift one of them--stair step them up as high as we could get.

I: Did Tyler have lockers at that time where people rented?

AC: They had meat lockers in there; the basement was full of them. They didn't have freezers then, I guess. Pretty big businesses had lockers. I know I had wild meat I put in there every year.

I: Then you went to work for the county. Where did you start?

AC: I had a crusher at Cove when I went to work over there. This was 1954. They was building a road from Cove that come out over here on highway 82. They was grading that grade and rocking it. We was in that area for several years. My job when I first started out there was helping the surveyor. I run a roller on the job for a while. I drove truck, hauled rock. Then we moved the crusher after we got through with all the roads over in the Cove area; we moved it to North Powder. We did a lot of roadwork up there. The county ended up with, I think, 21 or 22 travel vehicles that they moved from area to area. I worked there probably about a year, and Morgan had a couple fellas working in the shop down there building a precast bridge. They were having problems getting the job done. As long as he was there to tell them what they had to do, they could get by pretty good. But they couldn't read the blueprints, so he asked me one day if I could do carpenter work. And I said, "Yeah I've done carpenter work." So he took both them guys out of there and put me in there by myself. I built that darn bridge that winter and got it all done. Then he got my truck that I'd been driving truck until the time I went in there. He brought it in the shop; it was an old beat-up International, and you could go down the road and look right out through the floorboards at the gravel going by underneath it. [laughter] Didn't have very good floorboards in it; it was pretty well wore out. I took it in the shop and we worked on that in the wintertime, too--got it in good shape. Painted it up. Darn thing looked like a pretty new truck when I got through with it. Next spring, Morgan brought in another fella and drove my truck out the door and away he went in the truck I'd overhauled. I asked him, "What in the heck am I supposed to be doing around here?" He said, "Well, what do you want to do? If I was gonna join this building trade, I could've done that before I come here. I would've been building houses or something. I don't like the work I'm doing." He said, "Well, what do you want?" I wasn't asking more than what the operators get. He said, "I'll talk to the county court." The next time they met, he come back out to the shop and said. "We raised your wages back to the first of March." He kept me on the bridge crew. I worked on that for 13 years--built a lot of bridges; built everything he wanted built.

I: In the winter time there was a lot of snow removal and things on the county roads. Were you involved in that?

AC: They had a big steel bridge over east of Imbler that the river would run over and flood that bridge every year. So we jacked that big bridge up six feet and raised the piers and let the bridge back down on them. Two of us raised that bridge 6 feet in three days with two 20-ton cats. Morgan, he'd been real good; he was a good engineer. Wintertime there was a lot of snowplowing. The truck drivers and the grader operators would do most of that. I didn't run into that kind of stuff until later on until I got out of the bridgework.

I: How long did you continue with the bridge work?

AC: Between the truck driving and the labor work, I was probably on that for about two years. Then I went on as the bridge foreman and was on that for 13 years. Then our road master died and the next fellow that come there lasted four years, and I was his assistant while he was there. Then uh, then they made me road master and I was on that pert near a total of 31 years.

I: What's all the things involved in the road master, so somebody would know what your job entailed?

AC: He was responsible for 635 miles of road and 94 bridges at that time.

I: And you had about how many people working for you?

AC: Around 26.

I: You mentioned that it was good when they had the snow fences to keep the snow from drifting.

AC: Yeah, we had snow fence they put up for years. When I first went to work there, that was one of the first jobs the bridge crew got run into. They put up all the snow fence. After I was road master I got to figuring how many feet or miles of snow fence we put up--certain places to put it where the snow drifted the worst in spots where the roads would be blocked if it wasn't.

I: Where were some of the places that were the worst in the valley for snow?

AC: One of the worst places was right out there by the Summerville cemetery. We doubled up the fence there and put two rows of snow fence in the fields, blocking that hill there where the cemetery was at. And all the east and west roads out at Summerville were really bad for drifting--there by Dillard Shoates, Parks, and up in there, it really drifted. The Craig Loop road it was bad for drifting. Pumpkin Ridge, it was another bad place.

I: And everybody wanted their road bladed as soon as possible after it snowed, I imagine?

AC: After they consolidated the schools, it just doubled our work; you had to get out at 4 o'clock in the morning and get those roads opened before the school buses run. We had nurses that lived clear up on top of Pumpkin Ridge that had to go to work at the hospital. It was a chore to get those



roads open in time so they could get in and out. We had a schoolteacher that lived in Palmer Junction. Of course down there it never drifted as bad as other places, but they got a lot of snow out there.

I: So you had to get a crew out always and it didn't make a difference if it was during the week or on the weekend--had to get those roads clean.

AC: Wintertime I had the snowplow crews staggered so that we had the seven days covered completely. One crew would take off their time in the middle of the week and the other crew would work weekends. It saved the county quite a bit of money because they didn't have to pay overtime.

I: Were you involved in the budget-making process of the county?

AC: That was after I became road master. Big job: figured out, even right down to the bridge nails and up to gas and tires and equipment--the whole works. We'd make out a budget for everything and take to the county court and present it to them. It aggravated me because it took me so long to read off everything I budgeted for. They give ya 15 minutes; it might take me an hour and a half.

I: Of course you joined the union while you were working as a worker there, but then when you were foreman were you covered under the union?

AC: I'd probably been there ten or twelve years before they started talking union--before they got organized. I was just working under the administration part of it so I never did belong to the union then.