

VERNA COURTRIGHT

Union County resident for 79 years

AN ORAL HISTORY



Interviews in May & August 2002
at her home in La Grande OR

Interviewers: Vicki Correll & Eugene Smith

UNION COUNTY, OREGON HISTORY PROJECT

2004

(revised from 2003)

UNION COUNTY, OREGON HISTORY PROJECT
An Affiliate of the Oregon Historical Society

A non-profit, tax-exempt corporation formed in 2002

In collaboration with Eastern Oregon University
Cove Improvement Club History Committee
Elgin Museum & Historical Society
Union Museum Society

Purposes

To record & publish oral histories of long-time Union County residents
&
To create a community encyclopedia

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Preface

Much of the history of a place is stored in the memories of people who have lived there. Their stories may be told to family members, but, unless someone makes a special effort to record these stories, they become lost to future generations.

Each of the historical societies in Union County, Oregon has begun to make that effort. Tape recordings exist in several locations, some of them transcribed in written form, others not. A more ambitious and thorough effort seemed necessary so that more of the oral history of Union County could be captured and preserved.

The Union County, Oregon History Project, begun in 2002, is making that more ambitious effort. One of its principal purposes is to collect as many oral histories of older Union County residents as possible and to make them available in both taped and written form. This edited transcript is part of the series of oral histories to be produced by that project.

About the Interviews and This Edited Version

Three interviews with Verna Courtright took place at her home in La Grande.. At age 79, Verna appears to be healthy and vigorous, mentally and physically.

The interviewers were Vicki Correll and Eugene Smith, volunteers with the Union County, Oregon History Project. Vicki completed 2 one-hour interviews in May, 2002; Eugene completed a one-hour interview on August 26 2002.

Heather Pilling's full transcription (available for research purposes) presents the literal contents of both interviews. The edited version presented here differs from the literal transcription in the following characteristics;

- reorganization of content
- deletion of some extraneous comments
- omission of false sentence starts and other normal speech fillers that detract from readability
- normalization of pronunciation and grammar in conformity with standards of written English.

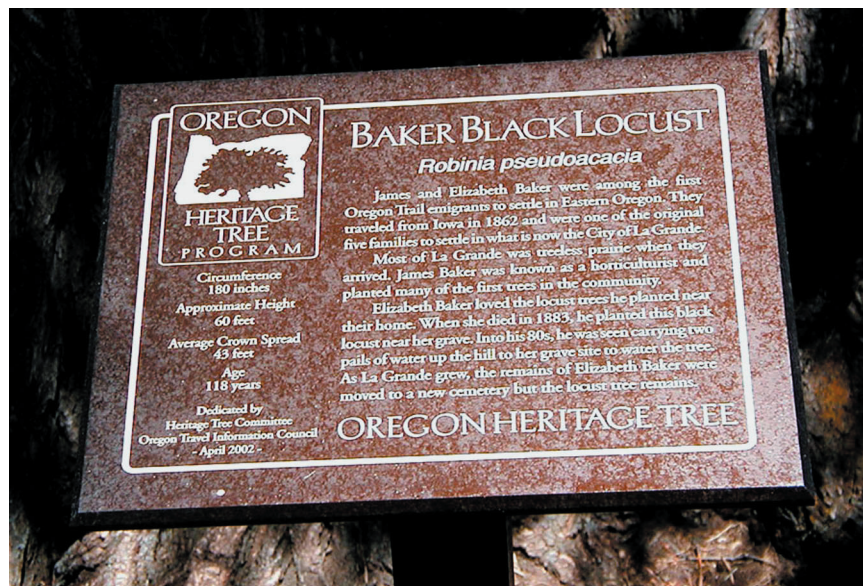
VC designates Verna Courtright's words, *I* the interviewer's.

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Born into the Baker Family of Union County

- I: Please tell me your name and your maiden name.
- VC: I'm Verna Courtright and I was Verna Baker.
- I: Are the Bakers a local family?
- VC: Yes. Several months ago, in April, there were several articles in the paper [i.e., *The Observer*] about a tree that was planted by my father's grandfather when his wife died.
- I: Where is the tree?
- VC: On the college campus [i.e., Eastern Oregon University].
- I: What kind of tree is it?
- VC: I think it's a locust.
- I: Where is it on campus?
- VC: At the men's dorm on the back of the hill--in front of the building.
- I: Is your family associated with the university?
- VC: No. That was the cemetery years ago. The cemetery was at College Hill. When they built the college they dug everything up and took it to the La Grande Cemetery.
- I: What an interesting situation!
- VC: But everybody knows that.
- I: I'm a newcomer so I didn't know.
- VC: I suppose. My great grandmother was moved to the La Grande Cemetery, but they didn't move the tree. At one time my sister said they were wanting to take it down. That made my aunt extremely mad, but they did leave it.
- I: Are the Bakers La Grande people?



Plaque on campus of Eastern Oregon University, designating historic tree status of locust tree planted by a member of Baker family

Photo by Eugene Smith

VC: My great grandfather lived in upper La Grande--by C or B Street. They aren't sure where he lived. My father was born under a bush near Mt. Harris. I wish he'd shown me the bush. Too late! He lived out of Summerville.

I: Where did they live, do you know?

VC: Do you know where Glen McKenzie lives? It's the next road north.

I: Oh, yes. Behrens Corner Road, I think.

VC: I went by it yesterday when I was in the cemetery and, going towards the mountain, it was on the left--one more house after that, before the corner. It's a white house, and there's a red chicken house there. There's a red barn. The house has a small porch and a half-bay to the east. It used to have a porch, a wrap-around on the front and on the side.



Baker family members at dedication ceremony for Baker tree, June, 2001:

l. to r. Margie Jarvis, [Jarvis's daughter], Mary Wiggins, Verna Courtright, Erinn Courtright, Thelma Rollins

Photo by Eugene Smith

I: So that's where your dad lived?

VC: Yes. Then you go on down the road to the corner (Slack Lane), and you would turn right down a lane. That's where my mother was raised. Mama was about nine and a half years younger than Daddy. He was at her house the day she was born.

I: What was her name?

VC: Lanman.

I: What was your mother's first name?

VC: Effie. An aunt to Billy Lanman and Arla.

I: The Lanmans did have land up on Pumpkin Ridge.

VC: They moved up there later.

I: So you're a local girl.

VC: I used to be related to everyone in the valley but not anymore. There are so many people around now.

I: Did you go to the Dry Creek School?

VC: I didn't. I lived here in town. I was born here. Billy and Arla Lanman went to Pleasant Grove School.

I: Was that school where the Grange is now?

VC: Both the schoolhouse and a Grange Hall were there.

I: I've been involved in getting the Dry Creek School on the National Register.

VC: Margie Jarvis may have gone to Dry Creek School.

I: I think she did. That's why I know of her.

VC: Her sister is Inez Frees. Their last name was Woodell, but their mother was a Baker--my dad's sister.

Parents' Early Life

I: Your mom grew up in Summerville?

VC: Yes.

I: She was probably poor, wasn't she?

VC: We didn't think of ourselves as poor because we had gardens and milk and chickens.

I: You had everything you needed.

VC: Mother had one older brother and two younger brothers. So she was a tomboy, which I could never quite feature. Here was my petite, quiet, little mother, talking about riding on the sled off the roof of the barn. She went out there with those brothers and did everything they did, I guess, which I cannot feature my mother doing.

I: What do you think changed her?

VC: It might have been when she had the twins and couldn't get around.

I: Was she delicate?

VC: When it came to work and canning fruit and all that, she worked pretty hard. I lived on a farm for fifty-eight years--until two years ago. You go to work at church, you do a dinner; you just work. You go home and work. Work, work, work. With her she could never have done a bunch of stuff like that, but I did. My husband was sixty-four when he died; his father was seventy-seven. I

we might have that many more years together, but we didn't.

I: Did they go to Dry Creek School?

VC: I think they went to Pleasant Grove School and that Daddy quit school at about fourth grade. Mama graduated from the eighth grade. Then she had summer school here in town; that was higher education, I guess.

I asked her one time if she ever wore a lot of petticoats like the little southern belles. She laughed and said, when it was time to go home from La Grande that summer, she had more than her trunk would hold, so she put petticoats on.

With just that education she taught at Wallowa. They had hired a teacher and the teacher got sick right away. Mother finished the school year, which was probably about eight months, but with just an eighth grade education. She married Daddy the next September, when she was twenty-one. By the 25th of September he was thirty-one.

I: Did she go to church when she grew up?

VC: I don't know where they would have had to have gone. Anything out there would have been quite away. I have a feeling that my mother didn't go to church until I was 18. Mama did join the Presbyterian Church and went every Sunday from then on. With Daddy being laid off all those years, I think she felt she didn't have the clothes to go to church or other social events. She didn't go to PTA. My idea of PTA in those days was that the women dressed up and wore their fancy hats. My mother was a quiet lady, and I didn't ever hear her say that that was the reason she didn't go, but that's how I felt.

Farming and Family Life

- I: How many kids do you have?
- VC: Four--three boys and a girl.
- I: You farmed out by Hot Lake?
- VC: Yes, three miles north of Hot Lake.
- I: What kind of farming? Wheat farming?
- VC: Some. The first year we were out there we had seed peas--a beautiful crop. We had peas and hay and wheat. Our place was right across the road where Ladd Creek met Catherine Creek, and it flooded every year. That's why we bought the place. It had flooded and so we got it cheap.
- I: How much did you buy?
- VC: Two hundred and forty altogether, and eighty acres was across the road, where it flooded every year.
- I: And it still does?
- VC: It still does. It really only flooded my side of the road once, which was just three or four years ago. It was halfway up the second step on the front of the house. It was about ten feet from the garage at the back of the house. The house was built up on a little rise. The surveyor told me once he didn't think it would ever come in the house. It didn't. Twice the road broke. The roads were built up as levies. They broke twice and then we had water on the side we didn't want it on. They got after it and pumped it down pretty fast.
- I: Did you go into farming right after you were married?
- VC: Yes. We got married and went right out there.
- VC: Allen's dad was the first one in the valley to have a Caterpillar tractor and first one in the valley to have a sprinkler--two miles north of Hot Lake. Allen's mother raised the six kids. She was a farm woman.
- I: Did you know you wanted to be a farmer?
- VC: Heavens no! I didn't. I knew nothing about farming. I could fry chicken and make a lemon pie, and that was the extent of my cooking. We were married the 23rd of April, and, in May and June, we were helping the neighbors. Allen worked for the neighbors, putting up hay. Then they'd come help us put up hay. I would cook for them. I really learned to cook that summer.
- I: You taught yourself?
- VC: Yes. I had a wood stove. No bathroom. We just had an outhouse. The pump was at the side of the house. I would go out and carry two buckets of water at a time. That was our dishwater and everything. Later we did get a hand pump in the kitchen, but that was harder for me to pump because I had to get a chair and push down on it. Our well was an artesian. The pump out there had a longer handle that worked really easy.
- I: So you went to bed early.
- VC: Yes.
- I: When did you get a toilet?
- VC: In 1949, when we got electricity. I had three kids by then. Gail, the youngest, was just a year old when we got it. We

had a bathroom already built for it. The year before that we had an old Delco set of batteries. They were second hand. At night it would run out of juice. You either had to go start it up again or go to bed. In the deep winter, of course, you didn't want to go out there and start that old thing up again.

I: How many Delco batteries were there?

VC: There were a lot of them. I don't know if there were twelve or nine or what.

I: So you had a set of them. That was what ran your lights?

VC: Yes. That was just for a year, though. The other years we had kerosene lamps. We had a gas lantern, but I didn't like to light it. I did, but it was more scary to me. It was much better light than the kerosene lamps.

I: When did you get a rural electrification?

VC: In 1949.

I: So that was the same time you got water in the house.

VC: Yes. There were three kids, without water in the house.



Courtright home on their farm east of La Grande, 2002 (now under different ownership)
Photo by John Turner

I: That's hard to do.

VC: It's fun to talk about, but you'd hate to go back to it.

Stock Show, 4-H, and the County Fair

I: I know you've been deeply involved in the Union County Fair over the past several years. It started, however, before you were involved, didn't it?

VC: I can remember when they had the County Fair at the La Grande Hotel out in the parking lot [at Adams Avenue and 4th Street].

I: The hotel?

VC: Yes. I'm not sure but they probably used the lobby for exhibits, too. I have no idea how old I was.

I: Was it in the 1930s?

VC: Yes.

I: Did they set up displays outside?

VC: I don't really remember. All I know is that it was there. When they did start having the fair where it is now, they had it in September. That's when the garden things--like pumpkins and squash--were good. I can remember that school had already started. That was good for showing produce, but they probably didn't get the attendance that they do now. They didn't have a carnival with it. A fair to me doesn't really need the carnival, and they didn't have one then.

I: From your recollection, were some of the reasons for having the fair in the first place similar to the reasons now?

VC: I think it was more farm-related then than it is now. It was in the fall, and the

farmers brought their produce in. Harvesting and combining were all finished by the time the fair came.

I: It seems to me it's pretty farm-related now, but it's less so?

VC: Oh, yes. More people come to go to the carnival than anything else, really.

I: Do you think showing of the animals and the canning displays, the preserves, and the flowers are just sort of incidental for most people now?

VC: The flowers and the produce are less because it's so early they haven't matured yet. I think it was more farm-related then than it is now. They used to have the fair a week before the state fair. The 4-H exhibits would be judged the first of the week, and then by Friday it was all put in a car and someone took them down to the state fair.

I: When it was more farm-related, would I be right in saying that the reason that farmers wanted to do this was to express some pride in their work?

VC: I would think so. And it was a time for farmers go to town and talk to other farmers.

I: Very much social, of course.

VC: Very social.

I: When you were on the farm with your husband, what was your attitude toward the Union County Fair?

VC: Our boys and our daughter, too, had animals. They took them to the stock show and the fair to show them. That's where we were involved in 4-H and FFA. It was a fun place to go and see everybody every year.

I: I'm assuming you approved of your children's taking the animals to the fair. What did you hope that they would get from that experience?

VC: Our first son did it, and then the other two had to do what he did. I think it was a good experience. They learned about the animals, and they learned responsibility to the animals. They found out it is an everyday job. My four kids learned to love and respect animals, and they got to feel like they were like their dad, Allen. He had cows. Allen was a gentle man. Dennis, our son, lives in Louisiana now. He has about three hundred and fifty head. We didn't ever have anything like that. Dennis's herd is mostly registered. They have all the patience in the world with them--calm and cool. I admire all their patience. I think 4-H did teach my kids calmness and patience. You don't do things with a bang because it scares the animals and then they're off. I think all my kids learned that.

I: I should think another thing that they must learn all the time is faithfulness to a duty that occurs every day.

VC: They did. One time Larry had to be gone maybe a week. He didn't trust his brother to feed his steer, so he had his dad do it and the calf still got off its feed because it wasn't the same person doing it all the time.

I: I was told that you were involved in Extension as well as 4-H.

VC: Yes, I was. I think my mother-in-law took me to an Extension meeting when I was first married. I was married in '43 so that's probably when it started. I don't remember if I started the first year or not, but it was out of La Grande.

I: Also, I was wondering about your involvement in the Eastern Oregon Livestock Show.

VC: All my kids participated. As soon as they were nine, they had sheep. They took them to the Stock Show and the Fair. Of course, we went too.

I: What was that like at Union back then? Were you involved in building the barns?

VC: No, we weren't. We missed all the building of the barns.

I: It was all done before?

VC: Yes, they have added to it since then. My kids were probably out of it by that time.

I: They just did build a new swine barn.

VC: They do have a show ring inside a building that wasn't there back when we were involved. The kids always showed outside--rain or shine. Allen was a 4-H leader for years and years and then Harvey Carter helped; the people around here all knew Harvey. He was from La Grande. He was assistant leader to him.

I: Did you do other things besides the sheep?

VC: I had a sewing group--little girls--till I got my daughter through. We took them to the fair, too. They would model on the top of the buildings where they have produce down below. At the fair there were steps going up on one of the buildings. Up there is where they had their style shows. I think those stairs are still there. It was hot--blistering hot up there in the afternoons.

I: They probably had wool suits to model?

VC: Oh, yes. It was nice when they quit doing that. It was nice when they built that 4-H building.

I: When did they do that?

VC: I don't know. Probably Gail modeled up there at least 1 year. Then they built that building.

I: Those things are there and they're so needed. You wonder how people did without before that.

VC: It was pretty rugged, really, because it was so hot and no insulation of any kind. They had a floor and a roof; the roof and sides were tin.

I: Do you work at the fair now?

VC: Yes, I'm in charge of textiles and have been for about twenty years.

I: You arrange things?

VC: And enter them. The judge comes and they are all judged. Then you make the room look pretty and baby-sit the room.

I: How do they pick the judges? Do they come from out of town?

VC: Yes, they do. Christine Courtright, my sister-in-law, is the manager of the fair and she gets the judges. She's been manager there for longer than I've worked there. She gets the judges and tries not to have the same judge from one year to the next, though they do come back after two or three years. I enjoy working and seeing people. The first year or two I saw all my relations I hadn't seen for a long time.

Health Care Then & Now

- I: What can you tell me about health care in the valley?
- VC: I've been a pink lady at the hospital [i.e., Grande Ronde Hospital] for twenty-six years. I have seen it change drastically. I'm the juice lady one day a week. I give the patients juice. When I first was up there, there'd be sixty or seventy patients or more, and it'd take me a long time to get around to that many patients. A lot of times they wouldn't have rooms for them, and they'd be in bed in the hall. That was too bad.
- Now I don't know if thirty would be average or not--twenty or thirty people on the med/surg floor. I go to the TCU [i.e., transitional care unit] floor, and there are not too many people there.
- I: The hospital is much larger now, isn't it?
- VC: Wing after wing after wing, it seems to me.
- I: One of the reasons it was crowded was that it was smaller.
- VC: No, I think the reason it was crowded--they may have less rooms now than they did--was that they stayed longer. When my husband had hernia surgery, they kept him three days and would have kept him longer if he'd had insurance. Now they do hernias and send them home the same day. When you had surgery, you stayed a week or two; now with surgery you go and have the surgery and go home right after it. That's why the census is way down.
- Every day there are thirty instead of seventy. In those days, you stayed longer when you had babies. I stayed ten days for all of my kids except Jay; with him I stayed about eight days. But, ten days like we did is too much. For my first two babies, they wouldn't roll up the bed. I had to turn over on my side to eat.
- I: Why?
- VC: I have no idea. They probably thought it was bad for you. Then after ten days they'd say, "Come on, get dressed, go home."
- I: Did you get up and walk around a little?
- VC: Not till you got home. I went to my mother's. I could walk, but I didn't have my balance. I kept running into the cupboards when I got to my mother's.
- I: You were kind of dizzy?
- VC: Yes. But when Gail came--she's five years younger than her oldest brother--the doctor told me I could get up and walk around and sit up. One old nurse there didn't approve of that. She said, "You've got to remember you've got three babies to take care of."
- I: Isn't that funny? Now it's so much the opposite.
- VC: I think women are more capable of getting up then we were because of the anesthetic.
- I: You had some, didn't you?
- VC: I had ether.
- I: So you were out when the baby was born?
- VC: I was with one; he came bottom first. There were twenty minutes that I couldn't account for. I thought that was

probably the reason. With the others, I knew when I'd had a baby.

I: Did they give you your baby right away?

VC: No. Jay had problems, and he was about the color of the sky. They said he'd try to cry before he was born and sucked in fluid. I knew I'd had the baby, but the doctor wasn't saying one word and the baby wasn't making any sounds. The doctor told the nurse "adrenaline." I thought, "My baby has heart trouble." They gave him a shot. They did have a bassinet beside me and they put him in it. When the doctor passed him to the nurse, he was blue. He had made one little tiny squeak. He hadn't cried. They put him in the bassinet, and then they built blankets up around him so I couldn't see. The nurse would look in and say, "He's pink now. Oh, he's pink, he's doing fine." I thought, "Liar."

I: Did you nurse your kids?

VC: Yes, I tried to but I was too nervous. I knew I was starving them. I did for a month or two each, and then I stopped.

I: They needed more?

VC: They needed more than I had. I was scared there wouldn't be enough. And, too, Larry and Dennis are just a year apart. So when I was trying to nurse the new one, the younger one should have to be fed, too. It was too much.

Three little kids were born in May and April, so when I had men to cook for in June, it was hard. No water. The first baby wash I ever did for Larry--my sister was out there to help me and I wasn't going to have her do them--I did wash them by hand. It was hard standing at the sink, washing those diapers and

everything out by hand. I took them out and hung them on the line. A dirt storm came up and, of course, I had little flannel nightgowns; the dirt stuck to that flannel like glue. It was an unhappy day.

I: Did you cry?

VC: I don't think so, but I sure wanted to. I'm not the crying type. I didn't ever cry at shows. I found out at an early age that, if you cry, your face gets all splotchy and awful. I think I learned not to. I cried for a year when my husband died, but I don't cry usually. I'm more apt to cry when I'm happy. I cried when my daughter was born. I'd had the two boys, and I knew I was going to have to learn to hunt and fish. I knew she was another boy. When she was born, I was crying. Allen asked if I still hurt. "No," I cried, "I'm just so ha-ha-happy." Gail always wanted a sister. When she blew out the candles on her cake every year, that's what she wished for. I didn't know it, but her brothers knew it. When she was 18, she quit wishing for it.

I: How many years between Gail and Jay?

VC: Five. Gail is four years younger than Larry. I was in the hospital about eight days with her, but I sat up and I did get up.

I: So it changed?

VC: When I was a kid, a friend of my cousin had twin babies. Dr. Otten [Fred Otten, M.D., practiced in La Grande in the 1940s and '50s] was new in town. He kept her in bed only nine days for twins. She should have been in bed twice as long.

I: Did you ever go to the St. Joseph Hospital?

VC: That's where I went for all four of my babies.

I: When did that hospital close?

VC: I don't know. My daughter was married by a Catholic priest in a Protestant church. My husband did ask him about the hospital closing, and he said that must have been politics--that it should never have closed.

I: What kind of politics?

VC: I don't know. Just the hospital politics.

I: So it was a Catholic hospital?

VC: Yes.

I: They built the other hospital later?

VC: The old Grande Ronde Hospital was the only one in town for years. They moved to the new one before St. Joseph quit.

I: There were two hospitals in town at one time?

VC: Yes.

I: Can you tell me about other birthing experiences that you know of?



Former Grande Ronde Hospital, ca. 1920s
(now demolished)

Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

VC: Mama had Bethel and then 18 months later Mama had twins at home.

I: Was she little, like you?

VC: My mother was really tall. She was about 5'1".

I: So she wasn't really tall.

VC: To me she was.

I: How tall are you?

VC: I never did quite make 4'9". All her brothers and sisters were about 5'3". Daddy's family were all short, too--about 5'4".

I: So she had twins. Did they live?

VC: The biggest baby she had was one of the twins. It was eight pounds. The other one was positioned wrong. I don't know what she weighed, but she was quite a bit smaller than eight pounds.

I: Did they both live?

VC: Yes, until they were seven. The doctor told her they were due the last of March, but they were born the last of May. I'm sure he just didn't figure right or the doctor thought, "As big as you are, you must be this far along." She didn't see



Former St. Joseph's Hospital at corner of
4th St. and L Ave., 1930s
(now a county office building)

Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

a doctor in those two months because he said, "Any day now." Their home was at Summerville.

I: She had the babies out there?

VC: She had the babies out there. The doctor came out there from La Grande.

I: How did she manage?

VC: She was in bed for three or four months. She had what they called milk leg. They did say she'd never walk again, but she did after three or four months.

I: What's milk leg?

VC: Once in awhile you'll have a cow that will have basically the same thing.

I: Mastitis?

VC: Yes. In a severe case the cow will get down and can't get up. We had one that Allen put in a sling and pulled up with a tractor, but I think she eventually died.

I: Did your mom recover?

VC: She did recover. Mom always appreciated living, even though the doctor said she wouldn't ever walk again. She was at her mother's house--the house where she grew up. Her mother took care of her and three babies.

I: What happened then?

VC: They never did really know what happened. All of a sudden Wilma [one of the twins] got a high fever. We didn't have a phone, but the neighbor lady did and they called the doctor. He said to put her in the bathtub with hot water and then cold water and shock her. In my mind I can still see that. I was four. She died. They thought it could have been a

blood clot on the brain. Why it happened they don't know.

I: She was seven?

VC: She was seven. To her dying day, tears would come to Mama's eyes when she'd talk about it, but it wasn't about the one that died; it was the one that lived--Willena, who crawled into a shell. She wouldn't play with the other kids. They weren't identical twins, but Wilma had kind of mothered Willena. A boy picked on Wilma one time and Willena gave him a bloody nose. She hit him! "Leave my sister alone!"

Willena died when she was forty-five. It was the strangest thing. We were back there in Illinois for her funeral. We weren't there when she died. My brother-in-law said they'd found out that Willena had died of cerebral hemorrhage. At first I thought, "That's the very same thing that Wilma had died of all those years ago," but it was just the opposite. One of them had a clot and one had a hemorrhage. She always had all kinds of health problems and several operations. She would get very mad very fast, but it wouldn't last long. I always thought if she talked to a psychiatrist he'd say that was why--her sister's death. In her later years, she did go to a psychiatrist, and that's what he told her and it made her mad. I feel like the death of her sister affected her whole life.

I: I understand that there were other multiple births in your family.

VC: Yes, Allen's mother had triplets. Two of them are still alive: Betty and Burr. They are seventy-three. Bernice died three or four years ago with cancer. His parents were Gilbert and Grace Court-right.

I: She was probably a little woman, too?

VC: Oh, yes. I think she was even shorter than my mother. She said that these babies weighed seventeen pounds all together. The girls were identical; you could not tell them apart. It's been really fun watching these girls grow up. They were so close--knew what the other was thinking. One of them started a sentence and the other one finished it. When they were learning to drive a car, they had to drive so one did the steering wheel, clutch, and brake and the other did the gas and shifted gears. It took something to drive that way. You stop and think about it, it was probably hard to do.

I Did anything happen to her from this experience of having triplets?

VC: I don't think so. I don't think that she really had health problems from having triplets. There were all kinds of jokes about them. One of them, as an example: they said that they heard that Courtright's lost one of the babies. "Oh, golly, how awful. What happened?" "Well, they rent from Conley and they have to give a third of their gross." That was one I can remember they said they would tell.

Gilbert was a hard working man. The babies were born 26th of August--in harvest season, although we used to harvest a little later than they do now. He got up in the middle of the night and gave the triplets bottles. He did help that much.

I: But he didn't help a lot, you mean?

VC: The way they worked then and had no electricity, I don't know how he would have had time.

I: Or energy.

VC: Yes.

I: She didn't nurse then?

VC: Maybe she didn't. I hadn't ever thought of that one. With three of them, she probably couldn't keep up. She wouldn't have enough milk.

I: Did she have help from her mother?

VC: No, her mother wasn't there. Her mother had died. Allen hardly knew his grandmother. Through the years they did have women from Union come in to help her. I would hope she had a little help. She had Phyllis and Allen and then had the triplets. The triplets have no middle names. Allen and Phyllis have middle names, but the triplets don't. I don't know where she got the Betty and Bernice, but Burr is a family name over five generations: Gilbert, Burr, Gilbert, Burr, Gilbert.

Religion

I: You mentioned that you had your children in the Catholic hospital. Was there a Catholic school, too?

VC: Years and years and years ago. I remember there on the same grounds there was a big, old building, and it was a Catholic school.



Former Sacred Heart Academy (right) and Catholic Church in La Grande

Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

I: So there must have been a pretty big Catholic community?

VC: It could have been--to have a school.

I: Do you go to church?

VC: I go to the Presbyterian.

I: That church has always been there just the way it is?

VC: At one time it was at a different location, but, as long as I remember, it has been the same building. The outside of the church hasn't really changed. They did build the Sunday School wing onto it, but that's about it. My mother was married in the manse at the Presbyterian Church.

I: Where is that?

VC: It's where the Sunday School wing is now. It was just a little house. They came to town and were married in it. When I was four or five, they had Sunday School in the manse. The minister wasn't living there then.

I: Where did he live?

VC: They had a house across the alley from the Christian church that the Presbyterians had bought. That's where the minister lived.



La Grande Presbyterian Church, 1930s
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

I: So that Presbyterian Church must be pretty old.

VC: Yes.

I: Were you married there?

VC: Yes. My sisters were both married there.

I: How come your mom wasn't married in the church?

VC: I have no idea. If they had a manse there, they surely had a church of some kind there. They lived at Summerville. They probably came to town in a buggy.

I: About when do you think that was?

VC: About 1917. My sister was born a year later. Daddy was rejected for the Army.

I: How come?

VC: It had something to do with his teeth. I don't know if he had false teeth at that time or if he needed them all pulled. That's what I always thought, anyway.

They came in all the way from Summerville. Now that my mother isn't here anymore there are all these questions I'd like to ask her.

Huckleberry Picking & Early Childhood

I: What would you like to ask her?

VC: I'd like to ask her about her wedding day. For a honeymoon they went up to Mt. Emily, camped out, and went huckleberrying. They were married the 5th of September and huckleberries were still going up there. That's a Baker tradition.

When we were kids, my dad lost his job. I was eight and he didn't get back on

until I was eighteen. He worked for the milkman to pay for our milk bill. He worked for the grocery man to pay groceries. When we went huckleberrying in the summer, we didn't play around. Mama would can sixty or seventy quarts.

I: Where did you pick?

VC: We went around town--up Glass Hill. They moved to town just before I was born. I was born on Portland Street across from Payless [former drug store in La Grande Town Center/Mall].

I: At home?

VC: At home.

I: What other childhood memories do you have?

VC: When we lived in Huntington [former railroad center, about 80 miles east of La Grande], I was in first grade, Willena in fourth, and Bethel in sixth. I remember having the impression that Huntington was a tough little town.

My mother had an Easter party there. The older kids, my older sister's age, were used to dances and drinking. Mama had kids my age come early to play my-age games. Then she had my other sister and they played; the older kids told her they'd never had so much fun.

What they were used to playing was "Post Office." Have you ever heard of that?

I: That's kissing.

VC: Yes. For my age group Mama gave us some paper, and we tore out an Easter egg. Then the next kids were

supposed to make an Easter bunny. That's the kind of thing she had them do. She also put pans and different things on the floor, and at the end of the room was an egg. Then she blindfolded us and, while we were blindfolded, she picked up all these pots and pans and the eggs. They thought they were stepping over all the stuff on the floor, but it really wasn't there. They thought that was great fun.

I: That must have been kind of a big deal for your mom to give a party.

VC: I think it was. I think the whole idea was to show those older kids that there were other ways to do things and have fun. That's the only party I remember my mother ever doing.

I: Had the older kids had drinking parties?

VC: I think they did--the kids themselves. You knew that they were a wild bunch, so what else is a wild bunch? I think it was basically a railroad town--way back in the boondocks.

I: Did mothers do things like that normally?

VC: I don't remember going to somebody else's party while we were there. I didn't have fancy clothes, but I think we were one of the better dressed in Huntington. Mama made all the clothes, and Daddy had a job then, working for the railroad. Every year she took us down to the photography studio and took pictures of us kids. We'd have little black slippers on. That stopped when Daddy got laid off the railroad. I don't think she ever did get back to that. I think in Huntington a lot of the kids' fathers didn't work for the railroad. I've got a picture of it and that's what I keep thinking.

- I: Picture of what?
- VC: The first grade. They were first and second grade. The little boy that had been chasing me home I thought was a bully. I think he had holes in his pants when holes used to be disgraceful. A hole meant you had no money to buy new ones. My mother made all our clothes.
- I: She sewed a lot, then, if she had four daughters?
- VC: She had to. I was so small I couldn't wear hand-me-downs. I don't ever remember a hand-me-down dress of any sort. I made my first dress at age nine. In high school I babysat and made my clothes. I bought a coat. I babysat for thirty-five cents an evening and bought a lot of fabric with that.
- I: Do you remember your mom teaching you to sew?
- VC: Not really. I just always sewed, it seemed like. My sisters all sewed, but not like I did. I made all my clothes.
- I: After your dad was laid off, he did odd jobs?
- VC: After a while he got on the Forest Service. Then he had a job nine months out of the year. When he didn't have a job, he worked in lambing camps for \$40 a month. He worked out at Union in the very worst kind of weather, but working for the Forest Service was a very good job. He got paid good wages, but we saw him only about once a month.
- Daddy didn't have a car. He worked in a reserve around here, and then they found out that Daddy's brother was a forest ranger up at Langdon Lake, in the same district, and they said two people who were related couldn't do that. So then they sent Daddy to Wallowa County. When he went up there, he would hitchhike home, and my uncle would take him back to work. So we saw him about once a month.
- I: How long did that last?
- VC: Several years.
- I: When he was laid off for ten years, was he home a lot?
- VC: When he didn't have anything to do.
- I: It must have been hard.
- VC: I think it probably was extremely hard for my mother.
- I: She didn't complain?
- VC: No. I didn't like to eat when I was a kid, so I was never hungry.
- ### Going Regularly to a Dentist
- VC: We went to the dentist every six months. I had very good teeth. My friend's family didn't do that, so she had rotten teeth; I think most of her teeth are capped now. They had candy at their house and we didn't. I'd go to their house, and there'd be a bowl of candy on the table, and I would not take a piece unless I was invited to do so. Once in a while, if nobody was looking, I'd take a piece, and I felt like I'd stolen something.
- I: Your mom made sure that you went to the dentist even though you didn't have much money.
- VC: Usually I didn't have any work to be done, but one sister, Willena, had been born with no enamel on her teeth. Willena was smaller, and they said that she

just didn't get the food. She didn't get maybe the right kind of food.

I: Even a regular pregnancy strips the calcium out of your body.

VC: She had a mouthful of cavities every six months. When we got a little older, Mama didn't want her alone, so she sent me and I'd get to watch. She didn't ever say one word about it, but it was painful. They didn't deaden teeth for kids then. Her teeth were all pulled after she graduated from high school.

I: You mean the dentist would just drill?

VC: He would just drill.

I: That would really hurt.

VC: It really hurt.

Recreation

I: Let's talk about recreation. Were there swimming pools?

VC: There was one on 2nd Street, across the viaduct and to the left at the bottom of the viaduct. It was condemned. I think they condemned it because there was ash from the railroad trains going by. They just abandoned it. They tore it



Crystal Plunge swimming pool,
ca. 1931

Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

out or filled it in. Crystal Plunge was what they called it.

Then about three miles out of town there was Pine Cone swimming pool--an outdoor pool. Both Pine Cone and Crystal Plunge were outdoor pools. We kids would walk to Pine Cone once in a while.

I: What direction was that?

VC: On out of town up the river. It was a cement swimming pool, with a dressing room, but it was just river water that was kind of cold. You had to become brave. I think they had cabins around there, too.

Then we went for years without a swimming pool in La Grande. It seems to me it's always been kind of a headache for them to keep a swimming pool going, and I can't figure out why.

Also, we'd go to Cove for swimming and stay all day. You could take your lunch, swim in the morning, get out and eat lunch, and get back in--have a really good time. It seems like it was lots more fun in my day.

Out where we lived [on Verna and Allen Courtright's farm], we had a sand pit--a deep hole. You could drive down in it. A young kid came to our house and asked Allen if he could ride his motorcycle down the sand pit. Allen said no



Pine Cone Auto Camp & swimming pool
ca. 1928-29

Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

because he was afraid of accidents, and we'd be responsible. This kid was just the nicest boy you ever saw to even come ask because a lot of them would do it without asking. He said he knew that his father knew Allen. We appreciated his asking, but Allen stuck to it. About two weeks later that kid was dead in a motorcycle accident.

I: What else did you do that you enjoyed for recreation?

VC: I went to the movies a lot--probably every Saturday. At the Granada you got in for five cents if you were under twelve. When I got to be over twelve, being small, I got in for my nickel. Alta, who was six years younger than I, would come with me, and the two of us would go to the movies for a nickel. We saw all the Shirley Temple shows. I think it was Wednesday night that my older sister and her boyfriend would go as a couple for twenty-five cents.

When we lived in Huntington and I was six years old, I saw my first movie --black and white and not a talkie, a

dumb, slap-stick thing.

Ackerman School

I: When you came back to La Grande from Huntington, where did you go to school?

VC: I went to Ackerman School. It was in 1929 when the college started. I was a first grader when Daddy got transferred to Huntington after one year. So I went to Ackerman from the second grade on and then my kids all went to Ackerman. Ackerman School was downstairs in the administration building and the college was upstairs. They only had one building. For P.E., art, and music we had the college instructors. Some people looked down on kids that went to Ackerman. One even thought that they were retarded.

I: What did they look down on?

VC: I don't know. Probably the student teachers. I think they thought, "Why have these students teaching kids?" At first, of course, there weren't very many student teachers; they had this other teacher over them.

I always felt that with first graders, where everybody needs help at once, student teachers would be a Godsend. I thought they got more individual help, but people that didn't go there didn't know that and couldn't figure it out.

Attending La Grande High School & Working at the Modern Laundry

I: What were some of your impressions of the boys who were on the athletic teams at the high school?

VC: We had a class reunion, and here were all these former football players; to me



First location of Ackerman School at then Eastern Oregon Normal School, 1929 (now Inlow Hall, Administration Building for Eastern Oregon University)

Photo by Eugene Smith, 2003

they had shrunk. I thought in high school they were big and tall, though Jim Bohnenkamp was a football player and he's still a big guy.

I: Did you participate in athletics during high school?

VC: I loved to go out for after school sports and I had a lot of fun. I wasn't very good--a little on the short side. I liked to play basketball. One gal that would guard me, a good foot taller than I, but I could run faster and get around her faster. I liked all the dance sports, too like tumbling. I wish they'd had the equipment then that they do now. I would have had a ball. But we didn't have any of that equipment. No, the athletes didn't impress me too much, I guess.

I: Did you work after school, too?

VC: I got out of school early--at 2:00--and walk down to the Modern Laundry [formerly at corner of Depot Street and Washington Avenue] every day.

I: Did you do this primarily because you needed the money?

VC: I think so. After my father got laid off from the railroad, money was always a problem. I baby-sat and then I got a big job at the laundry.

I: How did you apply for that job?

VC: I don't remember how I got it.

I: Do you think you might have seen an ad for it, or was it word of mouth?

VC: I liked to sew. I wonder if my home ec. teacher found out about it. That might have been the way.

I: Had you been aware of it before? Do

you think it was at the beginning of the school year?

VC: I think it was in the middle of the year.

I: What did they say you would need to do?

VC: I ran the darning machine.

I: You'd never done that before?

VC: No. Hand sewing was my specialty.

I: Had you ever sat in front of a mechanical sewing machine?

VC: No, my mother's machine was a treadle; the machines at school were electric, but I'd never run a darning machine. There was a little, short lady that would tell me what to do. And there was a lady, Ethel Bethel, which I thought was a different name; she was really nice. I think that she was one that finished on shirts. And Cleo I thought was the prettiest thing; she was the one that did the finish on the dresses--the delicate work. I enjoyed working there; those women talked to me just like I was one of them, when I was just a kid.

I: What did the darning machine look like?

VC: Just a heavier sewing machine, and it had to have been electric.

I: What kind of thread? Heavy, waxed thread?

VC: I don't think it was any heavier than any other thread. I think it was cotton. It zig-zagged and didn't do a pretty job. Of course, I probably got better at it, too.

I: What did they want you to darn, primarily?

VC: CCC [i.e., Civilian Conservation Corps]

camps were up at Starkey, and they had their laundry to do every week. I remember sheets and socks. Then they would come back the very next week--the same sheets and the same socks, with a bigger hole right by the one I'd darned.

I: You could see the darning you had done?

VC: Oh, yes. They had a pile sitting there for me, and when I got it done I was through.

I: Was it a pile two feet high?

VC: Maybe higher. When I got through I could go over and help the finishing lady, which I liked to do because I learned several sewing techniques from her.

I: Was there pressure on you to do it fast?

VC: For the darning there probably was, but the pressure was to do it well.

I: Were you darning the dirty things or the clean things?

VC: They were clean; they didn't smell.

I: That was a blessing.

VC: Yes, it was. In those days they cut the buttons off of the clothes and then sewed them back on.

I: Tell me why they did that.

VC: I think probably it was because the solutions they had and the way the buttons were made.

I: When you darned the sheets, you'd have to have some big table to lay them out on, wouldn't you?

VC: But I didn't have. I think it was just the floor. There was no big table by that machine.

I: They were clean sheets. Would you put them on the floor?

VC: Yes, they were clean sheets. The floors were wooden. They didn't have any linoleum or anything on top of them, but maybe they were mopped. It didn't bother me too much. I don't remember arguing with the sheets, trying to keep them on there. It was fun to watch the women fold the sheets--two women to a sheet. They'd snap them, and they'd be pretty.

And I liked watching them iron the shirts. They had two prongs to put the sleeves over and the sleeves were ironed in presses, and they had an ironing board to finish them up on. I liked watching them fold shirts; I got so I could fold shirts just like they did. I don't know if I ever did it there or if I just learned how, watching them.



Unidentified employee of the Modern Laundry,
La Grande, 1930s or 40s

Photo courtesy of G & D Fleshman Collection

I: Were these mostly the white dress shirts that men wore typically?

VC: Yes, there were lots of white shirts.

I: Most men who had office jobs wore white shirts and ties and coats constantly, didn't they?

VC: They did and that's what went through there. I think only one woman would finish up the shirts.

I: Did they stick cardboard in the finished shirts?

VC: Yes, around the neck and in the back.

I: So they really did look good?

VC: They did look good.

I: No plastic bags to put around them, though, I bet.

VC: I'll bet they had something else. I bet they had bags to put over the dresses.

I: A film, perhaps. I've seen that sort of thing, which I think was around before we got most other plastics.

VC: I think they were probably like our plastic bags, but I guess they weren't plastic.

I: Did they have printing on them that said "Modern Laundry"?

VC: Oh, I'm sure.

I: Did you go into the back part, where they were doing the washing?

VC: No, I stayed up front. By the time I got there at 2:00, the washing was all done. Most of the time I worked a full day Saturday.

I: Did you work 2:00 to 5:00 on school days?

VC: Yes.

I: And Saturdays from 8:00 to 4:00 or 5:00?

VC: 8:00 to 4:00, I think. If there was nothing to do, I went home early.

I: Were you paid hourly?

VC: I don't remember how much I was paid there. In those days it probably wasn't very much, but it was enough for me. I thought I had a lot of money. I had fun spending it on my family for Christmas.

L: Who owned the Modern Laundry?

VC: I can't think of what his name was. I didn't have much to do with him, but he was nice.

I: Most of the employees were female?

VC: Yes, what I saw. The trucks that picked up and delivered were driven by guys.

I: Did they have to drive up to Starkey to get the laundry there once a week?

VC: I don't know if the CCC guys would bring it down or if they had somebody to get it down.

I: Do you think that was the farthest-away customer?

VC: As far as I know.

I: Would laundry come in from Elgin or Summerville or Cove or North Powder?

VC: I don't think so. It was just individuals bringing laundry in, like we do today. Baker surely had their laundry and their creamery.

I: Were shirts about the most intimate kind of apparel that the laundry dealt with, as far as you could tell?

VC: I don't know where they did pants and all that.

I: You didn't see underwear going through?

VC: I'm sure it did, but I didn't see it.

I: How about neckties?

VC: I'm sure they had neckties.

I: Was there any kind of dry cleaning operation in connection with it?

VC: They had the dry cleaning--suits and dresses.

I: Was that primarily why they needed to cut the buttons off--to be dry cleaned rather than washed?

VC: Yes.

I: Do you have any idea what kind of dry cleaning solutions they were using then?

VC: I don't know. There was always steam everywhere, too. That didn't bother me.

I: Did you work there during the summertime, too?

VC: I don't remember really how long I worked there before I started work at the creamery. I don't think I worked there really very long. Maybe just till the end of school.

I: Maybe when you were about seventeen or eighteen?

VC: I graduated when I was seventeen. I was eighteen the next fall. I would have been seventeen when I worked there.

I: Work has never been a new thing to you, but I suppose working for somebody in an environment like that was a good experience.

VC: It was good.

I: A kind of discipline that you might not have in odd jobs, for example.

VC: My very best friend took care of a little boy. She did the house cleaning and baby-sat that little boy, but I made lots more than she did. So I really thought I had it good.

Boys' Jobs

I: What kind of jobs did boys of your age have at that time?

VC: Charles Patton always had a paper route, and then in the summertime he worked for Mr. Purdy at the Dutch Mill [formerly on Depot Street, near 4th Street]. He helped make ice cream there. In the summertime, when Charles worked at the Dutch Mill, he delivered papers first, and then Sarah and I collected for him. We went all over town, the two of us, on one bicycle, and collected for his papers. I know one time a lady told us to go down to the bar--her husband was there--and collect. We didn't know anything about bars. We didn't go in there. We had fun collecting for Charles.

In those days, you got up really early to deliver *The Oregonian*. I think that's how a lot of boys started out. A lot of them worked for farmers. From a farmer's point of view, it was a waste of money to get those little boys from town. Later, we had one come out one time, and Allen had him cleaning up by taking a fence down and he was throwing the staples. Then he got on a tractor, rode over the staples, and had a flat tire. That poor little boy had worked so hard,

and it cost us so much money that one day.

I: It sounds to me as though maybe he didn't get quite the right instructions.

VC: I'm sure he did get the right instructions.

I: But he didn't follow them.

VC: He didn't listen to what they were telling him. You have to have a little of that bred into you. General know-how helps.

Working as a Clerk at the Blue Mountain Creamery

I: You spoke about working in the creamery. Was that the Blue Mountain Creamery?

VC: Yes, it was next to the Montgomery Ward store on Washington Street. One wall that's painted with a mural is all that is left of it.

I: Do you know why they left that wall there?

VC: Probably holds other buildings.

I: Was the creamery joined to the other building?

VC: Yes, there was no space, but I don't remember what was on the other side. It seems to me it was solid.

I: About how many stories did it have?

VC: There were two. I was in the office most the time. They made ice--big hunks of ice, at least three feet long--but I never was up there to see it. They had an ice-making machine somewhere, and they were always pulling these big hunks of ice to an ice room for storage.

I: They used it in their own place to store their milk?

VC: They'd store it there. I don't know how big a storage they had, but they had daily orders for ice. My job was to answer the telephone in the office and then wait on people and write cream checks. One time someone called--I had just worked there a day or two--and



Blue Mountain Creamery, ca. 1923
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

said, "We want one in the house and two in boxes." I said, "What house? What boxes?" He got very upset with me and, "Who is this?" I told him, and then he realized I was new; it was the railroad. They wanted one in the house, which was the roundhouse, and two in the boxes, the boxcars. That was a daily order. I never did forget that.

I: About what year was that?

VC: 1940.

I: Did they ever make those large blocks smaller so they could be used in home ice boxes?

VC: They would cut them with an ice pick. You could go in and get fifty pounds of ice; they'd whack it off, using a pick axe.

I: Was it your impression that many people had ice boxes at home at that time?

VC: A lot of people had ice boxes. I had one when I was first married. I'd put mixed up Jello and set it on this hunk of ice, and it would be jelled in a very short time. I was crushed when I got my refrigerator. It took hours.

I: Where did the water drain from that ice?

VC: There was a compartment thing under it that caught the water.

I: What did you do with the water?

VC: Threw it out the back door.

I: Would you have to pull it out every day or so?

VC: I don't remember. It must not have been very much bother.

I: What a chore, though. I should think you would remember that.

VC: I had other chores. I was carrying water. We didn't have electricity. I was carrying two buckets of water. When I did my clothes washing, my husband would carry the water for all the tubs first. A lot of times the water got dirty, and I had to empty it out and carry more. So I wasn't too upset with this little dribble of ice water.

I: Let's come back to the creamery. Were you working there before you graduated from high school?

VC: I graduated in 1941 and I think it was the summer after I graduated. I was working for the laundry while I was in high school. I knew Mr. Tyler, who owned the creamery, and he asked me if I wanted to work for him. It was more money, and it was a steady job, so I started working for him. My wages, he said, would be \$60 a month. He said, "That's \$15 a week." But it was \$60 a month, not actually \$15 a week. That's one way he got around it.

At the creamery they made butter. A girl there tested the cream to see how much butter fat it had. They sold some cube butter--not a lot of it--that was wrapped by hand; I'm sure they don't do that anymore. And they made cottage cheese and ice cream. I think they also sold milk.

The price of butter changed--I think it may still today--every day. Somebody would call up and tell me the price of butter for the day.

I: Who would determine that?

VC: I have no idea. They just called me up.

I: Was it a man who called you?

VC: Yes.

I: You never asked, "Who are you?"

VC: I didn't care, evidently. We'd answer "Blue Mountain Creamery," and he'd say the price was up two cents or down two cents. That would determine how I wrote the cream checks. I thought that was interesting--that butter prices would change. I don't think the price of milk changed.

I: How could you find out who was setting the prices? That sounds a little strange to me.

VC: I have no idea. Of course, Mabel's gone. In fact, I'm probably the only person still alive that worked there because I was lots younger than anyone there.

I: Was that a long distance call, do you think?

VC: I think so.

I: Could it have been somebody in Portland?

VC: I would think maybe.

I: It seems, from what you've said about how he obtained his cream, that that would have been purely a local matter, maybe based on supply and demand.

VC: It wasn't a local matter. It was a federal matter. I don't know. That's why I thought it was maybe like the stock market--it's down, it's up.

I: It's the commodities market, obviously, but if they weren't controlling milk and other ingredients, why would they control butter?

VC: They didn't say. It was just the price of butter.

I: There was a lot of milk produced in Union County at that time, wasn't there?

VC: Mr. Tyler had milk routes and cream routes. They had a cream station in Union that belonged to the creamery here, where they picked up cream or people could take cream to it.

I: When they said cream, they meant milk too, didn't they?

VC: No, milk and cream are two different things. I don't know how they did the milk because I don't even remember writing any milk checks. I just wrote cream checks. Mr. Tyler even had a dairy out of town, and a lot of milk did come that they sold at the creamery. The milk made cottage cheese. It came from his dairy, but I think they had special dairies, and I don't know if he picked it up or if the farmers brought it in.

I: This a seven-days-a-week operation?

VC: Cream isn't as hard as milk. Milk probably had to be an everyday thing, but they'd run to Union twice a week to pick up the cream. They went up the branch [i.e., railroad] to Wallowa. I didn't write cream checks there, but they did go up the branch. Then they had another creamery out Summerville way. And farmers brought their cream in, too. Cream, if you have it in a cool place is OK; to make butter they want it a little bit old.

I: Was there any season of the year when supply was likely to be a little short?

VC: I don't remember any. When you have dairy cows, you can rotate.

I: There were enough farmers and enough rotation of the cows so that you didn't find that you were tight on supply some months?

VC: Not as far as I knew.

I: How long did you work there?

VC: From 1941 till I got married in April, 1943.

I: That was long enough for you to remember pretty well what it looked like inside. Could you describe what it was like when you went in the front door from Washington Avenue?

VC: To the right was the office.

I: How large?

VC: As big as this room [her living room--about fifteen by twenty feet], maybe a little bigger. You came in the door and walked two or three feet, and there was the counter.
That's where I sat--on a stool at the counter--and that's where the telephones and the cash register were. If they came in and wanted their checks, I would cash them. That was kind of fun. At the back of the room was the bookkeeper--Mabel Gray. She had children older than I am, but the way we talked I felt like we were the same age. I really did love that lady. In back of that was a small office that was Mr. Tyler's.

I: What was his first name?

VC: Royal Frank. R. F. Tyler is how I signed the cream check.

I: What appearance did he have?

VC: Short and fat and dirty. I liked him and he was nice to me, but he could be a stinker. He embarrassed me once in front of my friends, and I couldn't say, "I didn't do it." I had to keep my mouth shut.

I: Why was he dirty?

VC: He was all spattered with milk.

I: He actually did some of the work in the place, then?

VC: Not really. He might. I can see him walking around. He usually had a suit on. But he smelled like sour or spoiled milk, not just sour like you think of.

On the left was the butter maker's room. That's where they tested the cream. They had big vats where they churned the butter.

I: Was this hand-churning or electrical?

VC: Electric. And they had what looked to me like bathtubs that they made cottage cheese in. It was a big room.

I: How did it smell in there?

VC: Terrible. Yet they hosed things down. The floors were cement, but they weren't what I'd call clean. I saw Mr. Tyler put his hand in one of those vats and scoop out the flies.

I: I guess there were not state or city health inspections.

VC: There couldn't have been. Maybe it was just me being finicky. It smelled like a creamery and milk, and it wasn't all whitewashed and pretty. I think maybe the walls were probably just cement walls.

I: What was a typical shift for the men who worked there?

VC: Long, I suppose.

I: Twelve hours?

VC: I'll bet they were at work way before 8:00. I went to work at 8:00 and I got off at 4:00. My parents lived at the bottom of 8th Street hill, and I'd walk home for lunch and walk back.

You had to ask Mr. Tyler for your pay-check; you never got paid unless you asked for it. The girl that tested the cream for the butter--she wasn't the butter maker--was about two years behind in her wages. When she got paid, he would give her two checks to try to catch up. He was having money problems, like a lot of people at that time. He always wrote out the check on the top, and on the stub he told me to write "for labor" on my checks. So one time I asked for my check and he'd go in and write it out. I would write R. F. Tyler and put my initials, VB, and on the stub of my check I wrote "for hard labor." For the next check he wrote "for playing around." He did have a sense of humor. I really liked him and sometimes couldn't stand him.

They had lockers there--meat lockers. They'd cut up deer and elk; I guess beef, too, if you wanted it. My folks had a locker there. I don't know if there was any other place in town where you could have a locker or not. They had several different locker rooms--some in the back and down in the basement. That was dark and kind of scary to go down there. I rented out lockers to people. They smelled and my nose wasn't that sensitive. My husband's nose: I always said he could tell sour cream a week before it was sour. So mine wasn't that sensitive, but it didn't smell good. They seemed like dark, old, dirty rooms--not all white.

On the other side of the building they made their ice cream. I loved to go out and eat ice cream when they had just made it. It was soft and in those days we didn't have soft ice cream. I gained two pounds because I ate ice cream.

I: Did they make ice cream in many different flavors?

VC: Yes. Vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry, and they also made sherbert. His nephew, Paul Hyde, made the ice cream, and he'd always come tell me it was ready, so I could go out and get mine. They had big hunks of chocolate that we could chew on.

I: Was that ice cream sold to grocery stores?

VC: Yes and restaurants.

I: In gallon containers?

VC: I think they would have cans. They would take them to the fountains, pick up the empty can, and put the full can in. They had quite a business because they were the only one doing something like that.

I: When did the Blue Mountain Creamery disappear from its location?

VC: I don't know when it was. I hadn't been married very long when Mr. Tyler climbed one of the ladders to a locker room, fell off, and broke his neck. It killed him. I don't think it lasted very long after that.

I: Why was the building demolished, do you suppose?

VC: Because it smelled.

I: Did you watch it being demolished?

VC: No, by that time I was living out of town.

I: Nothing has ever replaced it on that lot except the parking lot?

VC: No. I felt bad to see the place go. I enjoyed working there.

Having a Bank Account at First National Bank

I: Did you have a bank account?

VC: Oh, yes. I saved my money.

I: Which bank did you use?

VC: First National. I was quite enchanted with what it looked like inside. It was big and spacious and I thought luxurious.

I: Lots of polished brass and dark wood?

VC: Dark wood.

I: Did the tellers sit or stand behind caged windows?

VC: I don't remember really going to the bank a whole lot of times, like you do now.

I: I asked that because you enjoyed spending money for Christmas for your family. So I supposed you had a savings account.

VC: Yes, I had a savings account. When I worked for the creamery, out of my \$60 a month, I would put in the bank about \$50, excepting at Christmastime. What did I have? When I got married I had \$800. I thought that was more money than I'd ever heard about before.

Marrying a Local Man

I: Had you been saving because you thought you might need it when you got married?

VC: I had met Allen. Allen was a year ahead of me in school. He didn't go to college the first year after he graduated, but he did the next year. So I was saving my money to go to Corvallis and go to college [i.e., Oregon State University].

I: Was he going to study agriculture there?

VC: Yes, that's what he was studying. I didn't know till years and years later--my younger sister told me--that my parents had always said they could have afforded to send me to college here [i.e., Eastern Oregon College], but they couldn't afford to send me to Corvallis. They didn't ever say that to me, or I would have been going to college up here. So I didn't get to college.

The war broke out [in 1941] before we were married. Allen was at school that year, and here came the war, so that was the end of even thinking about college. We got married, and, when Allen's dad



Allen Courtright and Verna Baker, ca. 1941
Photo courtesy of Verna Courtright

got him deferred--a farm deferment--he was mad.

That was something he wanted to do. He said no, so he went on a troop train to Portland for a physical, but he did not pass his physical and they never told him why. Allen was color blind; "To me red and green and brown were all kind of grey," he said. He insisted that he have another physical and passed it. Then they deferred him with a farm deferment.

Role of Women

I: What do you think about the difference between the way women thought about things when you were young and the way women are now? How have things changed for women? Do you think it's good or bad or both?

VC: I am shocked a lot of times watching movies on TV--which probably aren't the real thing. I am shocked more and more as I get older on what little rights women had. I've been kind of surprised at it because my husband treated me like a lady. I went out the door first, and he opened the car doors. I liked being treated like a lady. You find out that they weren't always. To stop and think I don't know when they first got their vote, but it's not too far away from my lifetime. To me that was idiotic. Why shouldn't women vote?

I grew up, I suppose, knowing all that, but I didn't really think about it till the last few years. It gets my goat.

When my husband died in 1988, I got taken advantage of moneywise.

Abuse of Women and Children

I: This is changing the subject a little. It

just seems that now you hear about stories of terrible abuse of women. In some lineages it is taken for granted that women get beat up; now we hear about it almost daily. That doesn't come out of nothing. It comes out of either heritage or being taught or something. Did it used to be like that?

VC: I didn't ever know people that beat their kids or their wives. That was just a storybook type of thing.

I: Did you ever hear about it?

VC: I don't know if I did. I suppose you'd hear your parents talking about it, but I didn't pay attention.

I: It wasn't part of your life at all?

VC: No. I do think in those days it went on more than anybody knew and it was hushed up, maybe. I don't think I knew of anyone in school that I would have thought had their parents who were mean to them. I know there were a lot of kids that you felt didn't have any money.

In my day we didn't have television. We did have a radio. I don't remember hearing things like that on the radio.

I: Were there girls that were sexually abused?

VC: You knew that girls were having babies. They'd go off to visit an aunt for awhile.

I: There just didn't seem to be as many problems then as now?

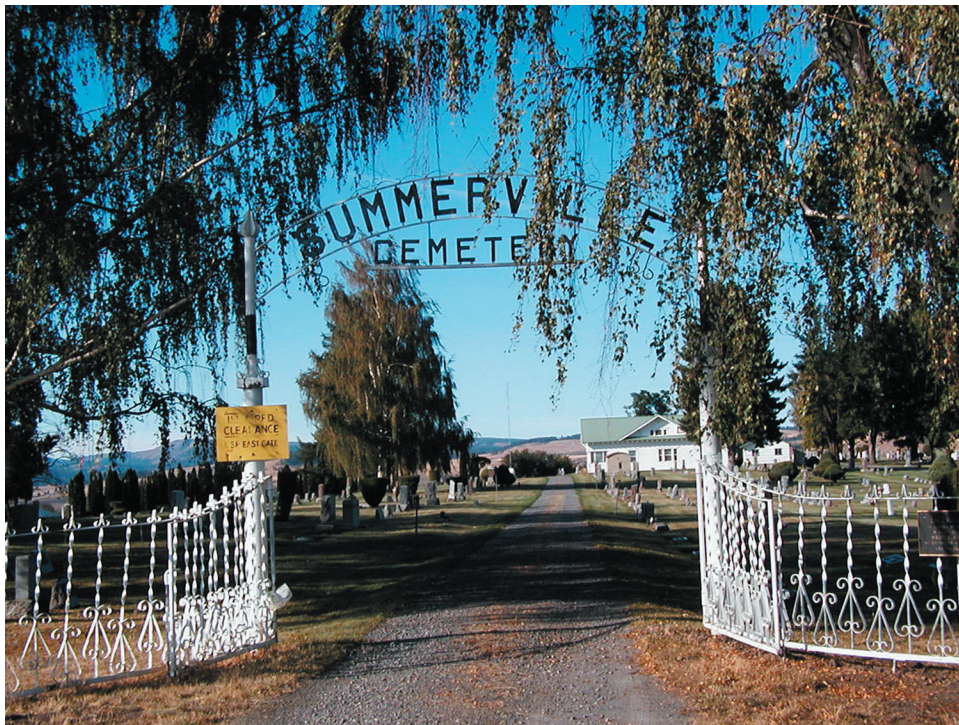
VC: I don't think there were. If they had drugs, heaven forbid, you never ever heard anything like that.

Baker Plot at Summerville Cemetery

VC: The cemetery at Summerville has the Baker plot. Years ago, they didn't have caretakers and so before Memorial Day my grandmother cleaned up their plot. She planted a snowball bush, which is still there.

I: Do you go out there?

VC: I go out there. My mother lost those two little girls; since then I've probably hit most Memorial Days. My folks always did. Memorial Day was always in haying season on the farm. My folks would take my kids with them. We'd go out there to be with our family. They're all there.



Entrance to Summerville Cemetery, 2002
Photo by Eugene Smith

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