

Warren Curry edited

First Impressions of La Grande

WC: My name is Warren Douglas Curry. I was born on August 1, 1928 and I am seventy-six years old.

I: Will you describe the first day that you came to Union County?

WC: It was way back in August of 1953 and I remember it very well. I had graduated from radio school. Ken Willard, the manager of KLBM in La Grande, had contacted me and invited me to come to La Grande and see the station. It was the biggest and only radio station here at the time. I was engaged at the time and my fiancé and I drove over here.

The closer we got to Eastern Oregon the more unhappy I became; I thought this was just what I had left in Wyoming -- sagebrush and nothing much else. Then we climbed Cabbage Hill out of Pendleton, got into the trees and I thought, whoa, I think we just died and gone to heaven. We dropped down into the Grande Ronde Valley and I thought, I'm going to like this place. We checked out the radio station. Being my first job and all, I was absolutely scared to death. Since I was going to get married I had to get a job, so I took the job at KLBM.

My first day here was September 11th, 1953 at 11:30 in the morning. Little did I know that date was going to be so memorable later on in my life. That's when it all started for me here in La Grande and I and my wife managed to stay thirty-six years.

I: On that first day when you came to La Grande where did you stay?

WC: We stayed at the Sacagawea Hotel where the U.S. Bank is now, on Adams and Elm Streets. In separate rooms, I might add, because in those days you had to be proper.

I: Can you tell me why you picked that place to stay?

WC: Not really except it was one of the biggest hotels here, and it looked like it might be the neatest. It had a coffee shop and a bar so I thought what else do I need.

I: Was it the only hotel in town?

WC: No. There was the Foley Hotel where the telephone company building is now, and there were several motels. Of course, I realized the historical factor of the name and I was very familiar with Sacagawea's story. We didn't go to school together or anything like that, but I read about her in school a lot. It kind of clicked. I thought, well, I'll stay here.

I: Do you remember what the rates of the hotel were?

WC: I have no idea.

I: Do you recall the population of La Grande when you moved here?

WC: I'm guessing 10,000, somewhere in there.

I: What did it look like?

WC: Pretty much as it does not except there was no freeway. The old highway came through town. Adams Avenue is pretty much like it was with different businesses now. Basically, there hasn't been all that much change. Most of the change has come about on the Island City strip. That used to be just a road to Island City with not a whole lot between La Grande and Island City.

I: Do you recall any of the businesses that were downtown?

WC: Bohnenkamps was a hardware-type store but is no longer here. Zimmerman's was a furniture store on the other corner. The Granada Theater was here and, as I remember, also The Liberty Theater, which was way down at the other end of Adams, kind of where Dominos Pizza is now. The Tropicidara was here, Lawrence's Jewelry, Birnie's Jewelry, J.C. Penney, and Ann Johnson's – which is not here anymore.

I: What sort of store was that?

WC: Ladies' fashions. There was a Chinese restaurant pretty close to China Mary's or something Noodles'. Cherry's Florist was on the corner there next to Ann Johnson's across from the Sacagawea Hotel. Cherry's has moved about three or four times since the 1950's. Many of the businesses that were here at that time are still here along with a lot of new ones.

I: Describe what The Tropicidara was and what it looked like when you walked in the front door.

WC: The Tropicidara was – and I think the name probably came from tropics because all I remember were palm trees and tropical settings -- some imitation palm trees when you walked in the front door. I'm sure the wall decorations probably were South Seas, tropical type decorations.

That's the biggest thing. They had a dance floor and a very fine dining area. It was another one of those special places to go, that was a little fancier than some of the others cafes. They had really good food, excellent. They had tables and booths, a dance floor and it was usually pretty dark in there as most lounges are.

I: Was there anything in town that enticed you to move here besides the beauty of the valley?

WC: That's just about it, the location and being fairly close to Portland where our families were in case we wanted to visit. I don't really recollect that we were so close to Boise. Being close to Wallowa Lake was also a deciding factor. We weren't skiers so we didn't care that much about Anthony Lakes with its skiing.

I: Was Hot Lake operating at that time?

WC: Hot Lake was here and I do remember Dr. Roth. They had some patients that were out there being treated with the mineral water and stuff. They had their own restaurant on a very small scale going at that time. The biggest thing I remember about Hot Lake was the little lake out in front with all the lily pads. It was just covered with those things. Hot Lake Hotel was operating but on a small scale.

They were trying to do a little remodeling there and they had opened up part for dining so we were out there once to go to dinner. Later on they wanted to redo the hot water systems so they did some tours where you could see where they actually had run the hot water through for the therapy. It was a very small tour. I don't remember much about it way back when it was the big hotel and the rail road would actually stop there. It's called the Mayo Clinic of the West, people would come out here to be treated with the hot mineral water and stuff. I never got to see any of the treatment rooms or rental rooms.

I: When you moved to Union County did you rent a home?

WC: Actually, we rented an apartment in the Grande Ronde Apartments on the second floor. There was a major fire and the third floor was all burned. After we were married in November of 1953, we moved into the Grande Ronde and then rented a small house on Washington near Lynch Motors. We bought our first home that was built on _(?)___. There were __ of us originally. We bought a home out there.

I: Do you recall the price?

WC: Yes, it was nineteen thousand and something or other. The main thing about the price I remember was that it included taxes of \$98 a month.

I: When you were renting do you recall what you had to pay for rent?

WC: I really don't. It couldn't have been a lot because I was only making \$250 a month at the radio station. So to pay rent, groceries and everything else, it couldn't have been a whole lot. It seemed like a lot to me then.

I: What sort of utilities did you have to pay ?

WC: We heated by oil and we had electricity, of course, and we paid the water bill. But I have no idea what the prices were.

I: Did you have garbage pickup?

WC: Yes, we did, but I don't know if we paid for that or if it was included in the rent. The place where we dumped garbage was so far from the house. I don't remember them ever coming by to pick it up.

I: Were your children born in La Grande?

WC: Yes, all five of them were born at the St. Joseph's Hospital up on K Avenue – which is now CHD and circuit court building on the third floor. We have six children, my second wife had a daughter and she was born in Portland.

I: What was the hospital like at that time?

WC: It was pretty neat. I remember that you could smoke in the rooms. You don't do that anymore! It was, of course, very clean. It was a Catholic hospital and run by Catholic Sisters. They were very neat and very accommodating, excellent care. At that time, there was an older hospital up on the corner where the White Birch apartments are now located on the curve just going out of town going west. I think it was the Grande Ronde Hospital. It closed and they built the new one up on Sunset.

I: Were you in the room when your children were born or in the waiting room?

WC: No, they didn't let us do that then. We had to wait in the waiting room way off down through closed doors.

I: What shape was the facility in at that time?

WC: Excellent. It hasn't really changed all that much internally that I'm aware of. I know the steps out in front are beginning to get a little haggard and broken, but they're trying to repair those. It was just really quite neat. The elevators were very good. They had two of them, one on each end. The sisters lived in that small building just east of the CHD facility up there now and they were all nurses.

I: Did you feel any Catholic influence in the hospital?

WC: Not overly. Of course they had some statues here and there. With the habits that the nurses wore, you were aware that it was Catholic Hospital, but it was not at all intimidating, not a bit. They were great to everyone.

Schools

I: Where did your children go to school?

WC: They started out at the Ackerman School on the college campus and from there to junior high – before we had the middle school – and then high school.

I: Are those buildings the same now as they were?

WC: They have changed. They built a new middle school and took the junior high down, or they kept up part of it and built a new middle school. The high school has had two additions over the years, but they are pretty much located where they are now.

The Radio Station

I: Tell me about your job at the radio station.

WC: It was really wonderful. When I started out I was just scared to death, my very first job in radio. My shift started at 11:30 in the morning and the program was called Buyers' Guide. People would call in with their ads to be announced on the air, little small things for sale or to give away. We had this gong thing like the NBC, duh-duh-dum, and after each item we had to hit one of those gongs.

I don't know how many of those I read and then missed the gong or hit the gong and missed the ad. I finally got the hang of that. I played a lot of records – 78s in those days. Our engineer had built a 45 rpm record player and I think at the most, we probably had a hundred 45 records and that was it.

I: What are 45 records?

WC: They're about I guess seven inches in diameter and they had a hole in the middle of them that sit down over a holder. The 78s were a little bit bigger. They were about like a dinner plate. Then we had what were called electrical transcriptions, ET's, and they were big dudes. They were about sixteen inches. They were like just a huge big platter.

I: How many songs would that hold?

WC: I think there were like maybe eight to a side on the ETs and of course the 45s were just one song per side. The 78 had just one song per side as well. The rest of them were all 78s or these big 16-inch records. It was called a standard library and we used it a lot. We read news periodically and read a lot of commercials. I don't think the tape cartridge had been invented yet. Basically, this was my schedule for a six-hour shift or so.

The equipment we had was a consol and I mentioned, I think, earlier the 45 record player that was kind of a homemade thing that our engineer had put together. I think at the most we probably had thirty to forty 45 records.

Looking back at the equipment that we used, it really looked pretty snazzy to me, but it was pretty antiquated equipment compared to what we have now. We were able to do what we were there to do, play songs, read the news, interviews, community entertainment. At that time we were it, we were the only station, so we had a lot of responsibility.

I: What was the significance of radio at that time?

WC: I suppose the spontaneity of it, being able to be on the spot and give information out, compared to printed matter. We did have *The Observer*, which was a big part of the community as far as advertising and information. People got their news from either *The Observer* or the radio station. Television hadn't come into the valley yet at that time so we didn't have the benefit of television. There was the bigger, Portland paper, *The Oregonian*.

The main thing was that we were just the hub of the community. If there was anything going on we just felt responsible that we had to report it. I remember elections we'd be on the air all night waiting for election results to come in. People relied on that. I think the main thing is just after I had been here a while and realized what an important thing it

was to be in a position at a radio station to fulfill community service, entertainment and information. I use the word responsibility, but that's exactly what it was, and the Federal Communications Commission wanted stations to perform community service.

I: More so than entertainment?

WC: They knew it was an entertainment medium, but then they also knew that it was viable communication access to keep the public informed to what was going on.

I: Do you feel that radio during that time helped to keep the community together?

WC: I'm sure, you bet. Not only here, but in any small community -- Baker, Enterprise, Ontario -- these smaller communities all had their radio stations and only one at the time in each community. So I'm sure that it helped hold everybody together.

I: So when would you do the recording and when would you do the live?

WC: You did recording when you were off the board shift.

I: What is the board shift?

WC: On the air. It's what they call being on the board. But most of that was done after you got off of that work. Sometimes we just had people and that's all they did was do commercials, type the copy and then record them. So it did tend a lot of times to increase your staff because you had more people involved in doing these things.

I: Can you take me through a typical workday?

WC: Just as I can remember, the first thing, of course, and for many, many years I signed on the station. This is way back before twenty-four hours. We were on the air from like six in the morning until eleven at night.

I: And what do you mean by signing on the station?

WC: To turn everything on and go on the air and make the announcement that this is KLBM, broadcasting on what frequency. Then the first thing you did was a live newscast or, the days when we finally went to the network, we would go on the air with ABC News first. From there it was commercials and music. Along about seven or so, we would go into the local news and cover it pretty well. After that, we had special programming like the Trading Post, where people could buy and sell merchandise or things. Kind of like a yard sale on the air is what it was pretty much. Throughout the whole shift the rest of the day sometimes there would be interviews, like at ten-thirty was a special time to have a fifteen minute interview, music, commercials and news and weather.

Our news director, Bob Mask, was the one that was pretty much in charge of setting up these interviews. If it was during elections he'd have candidates on the air. If it was a school election they would talk about the school issues, that type thing.

My shift ended at eleven-thirty and then they would do much the same thing. Of course the noon hour was almost always devoted to news, either network or local Northwest news, farm news. The rest of the day was just pretty much music, commercials and trivial information. Back in those days the DJs didn't yak it up all that much. I guess maybe we hadn't learned to do that yet. We relied pretty heavily on music and this type thing.

I: What were you earning?

WC: \$250 a month and I was really thrilled with that.

I: Did you choose the music that was played or did you have a supervisor?

WC: No, we got to choose our own music. Of course, people would call in and make requests during the request hour. Actually, people would call in during the day and say play this or play that record.

I remember specifically when Elvis Presley first came out on Sun Records; he had a record called "I Don't Care if the Sun Don't Shine". I thought it was absolutely fantastic and I tried to play it a lot even though nobody ever requested it. Who in the world is Elvis Presley. It wasn't until 'Hound Dog' and 'Blue Suede Shoes' came out – which I could not stand, did Elvis make a name for himself. I thought yuck! But those were the ones that made him popular. When Willie Nelson first appeared, I tried to play a lot of his music, but I didn't get any response. Nobody seemed to think he was ever going to amount to anything. Well, he did, he sure did. We got to pick our own music.

I: Did you answer your own request line?

WC: Actually, it was mail-in request, people mailed in their requests on cards or letters. It was a lot easier if they would write us and send us a letter that we could respond to. You didn't have the time necessarily to go get that requested record right then unless you knew right where it was, which wasn't always the case 'cause we had many, many hundreds of records to go through. It was just easier if they would send a letter and request it in writing. Then we could respond to that letter on the air before we played the song or whatever.

I: So were the letters specifically for requests for music or did listeners ask for other types of information.

WC: Mostly for the music for the request hour, but a lot of times we got letters requesting information on people or things in the community. Not so much that we'd need to answer it right away on the air, but just that they were curious about having us check into this and do some investigation.

I: Were there limitations on what sort of music could be played?

WC: In those days not really because most of the music was okay; you didn't have any swear words or anything like that. The only thing I objected to were these country-western songs that talked about divorce, romantic threesomes, that kind of thing. I thought, is that

all they can write about? And “my grandma got hit by the train”-- that type of subject matter. I actually wrote a letter to Nashville once asking them “Can’t you straighten out these people and have them stop writing this kind of music? I got no letter back from Nashville and Nashville is still there and going strong.

I: To someone specific in Nashville?

WC: I can’t remember now, but probably one of the major recording studios. I just thought, oh my goodness, can’t they come up with something else? They’re still doing it, they still are, only it’s worse now.

I: Did you experience censorship in any other way?

WC: Not really. Everything was really cool in those days. You just didn’t have anything to be censored. Of course you didn’t dare use profanity on the air, no way.

I: You said you couldn’t use profanity, but were there other words that they use now that you weren’t allowed to use then?

WC: No, just profanity and the usual four-letter words were just unheard of. You didn’t even think about using them. We didn’t really have that much talk time like they do now. Whenever we were talking, it was mostly reading commercials, news or introducing records. There wasn’t call-in talk radio like it is today. You didn’t have much chance to get off track with your language.

I: Where was the radio station located?

WC: Well, way, way, way back I guess at one time they were located in the Sac Hotel in one of the back rooms upstairs. Now I don’t remember that for a fact, but I’ve heard it said that that’s where they started. Then they moved out on Highway 30 going out of town about a mile out of town (towards Baker). There, we were located in a house.

I: Do you know why they moved originally from the Sac out to the house on Route 30?

WC: I really don’t know unless they just wanted more room. They didn’t have much room upstairs at the Sac except a back room with really antiquated equipment. They probably wanted to have a bigger console and more turntables; they just had to have a bigger place. I’m guessing that’s why they moved out there.

I: Did the house have to be remodeled specifically?

WC: Not really.

I: Did it have to have the glass walls in the studio?

WC: Just one for the studio between the console, the control room and the studio; that was the only glass wall that I remember. It was just like a huge big picture window. We had two offices, a main office and a restroom and a transmitter room and that was it. It wasn’t very big.

In 1955 we moved into the Sac Hotel downtown. We were there until I think it was 1970 when they decided they were going to tear down the hotel so we had to find someplace else. We already had the tower out on Cove Avenue so the decision was made to move out there by the tower. We'll be out of town. Nobody's out there but us. So that's what they did. Of course now everybody's out there, houses and businesses all around the radio station. Actually, we were pretty much out in the country at that time. We had a big, self-supporting tower that stood right there. There were some homes nearby, but no other commercial buildings.

I: How long had the radio station been in existence?

WC: As I remember, they went on the air in 1938.

I: Who was the owner?

WC: When I came the owner was Inland Radio Incorporated. Lee Jacobs was the president, Gordon Kats from Ontario – KSRV in Ontario – and Ken Lockwood in Baker were the major owners. Ken Willard was our manager here in La Grande at KLBM.

I: Can you describe the equipment that was used in your job?

WC: Pretty antiquated compared to what we have now. At the time I thought it was really first-rate stuff and it was really. We had two great turntables and a full-fledged consol with knobs and dials like crazy. There was that 45 record player which was kind of a homemade thing, but it worked. We had a studio with microphones so we could do live broadcasts.

I remember when we moved from out on the highway to the hotel, it was when cartridges became popular. I remember saying to the other guys, I said, "Why in the world are they even buying those? They're never going to be popular. Who'd want to have a cartridge?" Well, I couldn't have gotten along without them after that.

I: Was this an eight-track cartridge?

WC: They're single tracks, but they were specifically designed for radio broadcast. They're kind of like the eight-tracks and you could record music on them or use them a lot for commercials. You could have a whole bunch of them lined up with lots of commercials and just instantly hit the 'On' button and they'd play, as opposed to using live copy. Before that we read everything live, news and commercials. So the cartridges really filled a big void. You could have sound effects, you could do a lot of things with them that you couldn't do with live stuff.

I: How did cartridges change the order of your working day?

WC: It simplified a great deal and made work a lot easier. Now, you could have different voices, other people on the staff could record commercials. So people didn't have to listen to one guy for five or six hours straight.

I: Did you pre-record your show?

WC: No, but we did pre-record a lot of interviews. When we joined the ABC Radio Network we taped a lot of programs like Paul Harvey and Alex Dryer. I've almost forgotten their names now. We'd tape their programs earlier and then delay broadcast. Sometimes we took them live.

I: Where was the radio tower located once you moved to the Sacagawea?

WC: Out where it is now out on Cove Avenue.

I: Can you tell me about some of the memorable interviews you did?

WC: I actually, did very few interviews. Most of that was up to the news department. Bob Mask was our local newsman at that time and he did almost all of the interviews. So I really don't have any memories of doing anything special with interviews.

Working as a DJ

I: So what did you feel your role at a DJ was, relating to the tastes of people's music?

WC: I felt – here again the word responsibility comes in – to keep people informed and entertained and set an example. In those days we were very careful with the language we used. There was no swearing and foul language on the air at all; it was unheard of. We had to make sure that we complied with that and set good examples. We knew a lot of the young kids were listening and a lot of times would come and visit the station just to watch, especially when we were in the hotel up on the mezzanine. They'd be up there standing on the mezzanine leaning over the rail watching us behind glass in there. So we just knew that we had to mind our p's and q's and be careful what we were doing.

I: So how did that effect the selection of music that you may have played?

WC: It had a big factor. Of course most of the music that we had to choose from was okay, I can't even think of any records that we could not play in those days. There was no foul language or anything like that.

I: So you were able to play a variety of music from country to rock and roll?

WC: We covered it all. I wasn't too big in rock, but I probably played a few that were a little borderline. I was not a rock and roll fan.

I: How many DJs were there at that point?

WC: I think we had five on staff.

I: So I would imagine the selection varied from DJ to DJ as far as what style they preferred.

WC: Yeah. The night guy was into rock. Of course that's when the kids were all listening so we primarily had the younger guys at night that could keep up with it.

I: Were you always a DJ at the radio or did you have another position?

WC: It evolved into several things. I started out as a DJ and then I worked into sales, and was assistant manager for a while.

I: Can you tell me more about your work in sales?

WC: It was really quite interesting. It was very hard to explain selling air time to people. How do you sell it? You had to explain to them that what you were talking about were commercials. In those days radio was still pretty new as far as advertising went, so you had to convince advertisers that a number of people would hear their announcements. I liked it a lot.

I: Do you recall what types of ads you were selling?

WC: All kinds. Sometimes we'd get to do our own commercials -- some you could make humorous and some clients wanted them straight forward. I do remember one I was doing for the old Montgomery Ward store when barbeque braziers were becoming very popular.

I: What is that?

WC: Braziers like barbeques outside. I was doing up this really good commercial, reading it on the air, and just having the time of my life. I said, "Stop in and see the new brassieres, the new barbeque brassieres at Montgomery Ward." I remember that commercial and I did not get fired.

I: Do you recall how much ads were selling for at that time?

WC: I don't remember. We're talking probably like \$2.50 for a thirty second commercial, somewhere in that general area. We had packages, the more you buy the cheaper they get their ads -- buy a sixty second spot package or if go on a yearly contract type thing.

I: Was that ad played as many times as they wanted?

WC: No, it was a one-time spot, a one-time ad.

I: What types of businesses advertised on the radio with you?

WC: All of them were mostly local. None of them could get away from us. We were out chasing them all down.

Radio advertising sells some products better than others. We had people that had been on the air for years and years and just stayed with it, either sponsored programs or had what we call spot announcements. We never really had a problem of selling advertising.

I: Was there an awareness in the early days of radio of how radio worked?

WC: I'm sure there was.

I: Or was it confusion?

WC: I really don't know. This radio thing, is it any good? Then people were able tune into stations and get national programs like Jack Benny or Fibber McGee and Molly, the big shows. The people tried it and if they got response to their commercials or the information then they realized that it did work.

I: Were the ads cleared by the advertiser?

WC: A lot of the times, yes. You'd get the information they wanted in their commercials, go back to the station and either you or the copy writer would write the copy, type it up, and then we would take it to the advertiser, or if it was going to be taped then we'd tape it and then call them up on the telephone and play it over the phone for them so they would hear it.

I: Why do you think broadcasters would choose a small place like La Grande when radio wasn't everywhere?

WC: Actually, a station is selected by local people that get together and raise the funds to build a radio station. They have to apply for a license. At that time La Grande was ten thousand, which is pretty good size. It was felt that there was a reason for a station to be here and enough businesses involved to pay for it, and that they could make money through advertising.

I: Tell me more about your position as assistant manager at the radio.

WC: There wasn't really an awful lot involved in that unless the manager was going to be gone somewhere and a major decision had to be made. I don't remember having to make any major decisions as such.

I: How did you convince the advertisers downtown of how many listeners you had.

WC: We did have printed matter. We hired an organization to come in and kind of check the community and then they'd come out with printed material you could take, a brochure type thing, that you could take to the...[end tape]

I: How did you get news from outside Union County?

WC: We had a teletype, Associated Press, which came in on a telephone line, and we had that going for many, many years. Eventually we started getting news items by satellite.

I: Can you describe the teletype machine for me?

WC: It was a bona fide typewriter that at that time was put out with the telephone company hooking it up because all the information came by telephone lines. It typed out the news.

I: What did it look like?

WC: It looked like a typewriter, actually.

- I: How did it work as far as the paper physically coming out? Was it a big long stretch of paper?
- WC: It was in a roll at first and then they came out with box paper. But it would just start typing and then you'd watch what it was doing. If it was doing like a local or a Northwest news you'd tear it off as you wanted it. The size of your paper was eleven inches or something, and in sheets. Sometimes it'd come in like a special program you'd wait for the whole thing to print out and then you'd tear it off and then fold it up and save it.
- I: Or did it come off in paragraphs?
- WC: Just like you were typing a letter, much the same thing. The paragraphs were separated by a few spaces. It was usually double-spaced so you could read it real easy all on one page.
- I: How large were the rolls of paper?
- WC: They would be about the size of a roll of toilet paper only maybe twelve inches wide.
- I: Do you know when the change from teletype to satellite occurred?
- WC: It was probably about 1980 when we went into the satellite communications. When I was at the station we didn't get music and other stuff by satellite that they are receiving now a days.
- I: What is the most memorable time for you at the radio station?
- WC: There were so many. When we had moved to the Sacagawea Hotel on the mezzanine, that was great because any notables who came to town stayed at the Sac and we could look down out our windows into the lobby and see all kinds of people. Marty Robins was here once, Jeff Chandler, Dorothy Malone, people from Pillars of the Sky, government figures, the governor.
- I remember Senator Mark Hatfield was visiting. He was going up the stairs to the mezzanine and I was going down the stairs – apparently I'd gotten off shift or something. As we're passing on the stairs I said, "Hi, Mark." When I got to the bottom I thought, "Oh, you jerk. That was a United States senator, idiot. Even if you do know him you don't call him Mark." But I did.
- I: Did he respond to you?
- WC: Yes, he did; it was great. I'd almost forgotten about that one.
- I: Is there anything else that sticks out in your mind about your time at the radio station?
- WC: There probably are a lot of them and I'm going to think of a lot of them after we get through here. Of course we were always involved in community. We were always doing something with the fair or the Eastern Oregon Livestock Show. We were big into making floats and stuff like that. I remember two Union County Fair Parades, we at the station decided to be a band, though not a one of us played an instrument.

We came up with all this crazy stuff to play, wash tubs or pans – I remember a big wash tub we used for a bass drum – and walked down the street kind of humming tunes. I think one guy did have a kazoo. I remember our manager Ken Willard was the drum major. He was leading out in front of the band with a baton. It was hilarious, absolutely hilarious! In one of the parades we were the very last entry and I forget what we called ourselves, but we were picking up manure from the horses. We were all dressed up, the girls in formals and the guys were in white shirts and ties and here we are shoveling this manure at the end of the parade. We had a great name, but I can't remember it now.

I: During the fair did you go out on location?

WC: In fact, we had a booth at the fairgrounds where we did a lot of live broadcasting. We would have livestock people or anyone come into our booth or we would take a remote microphone and go out among the public enjoying the fair.

I: Did you work alone?

WC: Usually there were at least two of us, one to operate the equipment and then either Bob Mask or Ken were doing the interviews. But you had to have somebody there to kind of watch the equipment, too.

I: Why would you have to watch the equipment?

WC: To make sure that you had the levels right, that it didn't get unplugged or didn't break down. It's just a normal thing to have somebody watching what's going on.

I: How many hours a day was the radio operating?

WC: At the fair or just generally?

I: In general.

WC: I think for the most part, we signed on at six in the morning and off at eleven o'clock at night. We were off overnight. A few years ago we went to a twenty-four hour operation, but by then we were automated. We didn't have to have anybody right there at the station.

Sac Hotel

I: Tell me what the inside of the Sacagawea Hotel looked like?

WC: The radio station at that time was located on the mezzanine. I said at the time we moved, "how in the world are we going to have a radio station on the mezzanine?" There didn't seem to be enough room, but it worked out very well. They put up glass windows that we could see out of down to the lobby. We had a studio, control rooms, the news room, and a record room, which had tons of records back -- 78s and 45s.

We liked it because we could see anything that's going on down in the lobby. Whenever anybody important came to town they always stayed at the Sac and we had a full view of

them. Most of the time we were able to get them for an interview on the air. When they made the movie Colors of the Sky here, Jeff Chandler stayed here. I can't remember the names of the other movie stars, but they all stayed here and spent a lot of time at the radio station. There was just so much activity going on down in the lobby. If anything important was happening in town it happened at the Sac. Upstairs – on the same floor we were on, the mezzanine, they had a small ballroom and a large ballroom for dances and meetings, (Lions Club, Kiwanis, etc.) A lot of those clubs met in the small ballroom.

One time Frankie Call and his orchestra were here. He had a big orchestra back in those days, and they played in the large ballroom to a big crowd.

I: What did the large ballroom look like?

WC: It was nothing really spectacular, just like a big lodge hall with chairs, hardwood flooring (no carpeting), no special chandeliers or anything like that. Both the large and small ballroom had wood floors. There was always all kinds of activity; something was always going on in either one of those two ballrooms. The Hotel was seven stories with very adequate rooms, and an elevator. There was also a neat stairway, about a half circular, that came from the lobby up to the mezzanine with a wooden banister.

When they decided that the hotel was going to go and they were tearing it down they had a real special party where they gave away dishes, glasses, and other things as souvenirs. These had the picture of Sacagawea on them, and this magnificent picture of Sacagawea is now hanging in the U.S. Bank. They saved that, thank goodness.

There was a lot of activity going on between the Sac Annex and the Sacagawea Hotel. Of course it had the coffee shop and the Sand and Sand Room, which was the bar and lounge was downstairs.

I: Do you recall what the coffee shop looked like?

WC: Like a restaurant, with green walls, I think. It was just your typical coffee shop, with really good food. Everybody ate there when you went out and did something special. There weren't a lot of specialty places to go in those days and the Sac Coffee Shop was one of them. It was just so neat to be part of that.

I do remember one thing about the Sac Hotel adjacent to the radio station when we could climb out the windows of the studio and be on the marquee. We would sit out there and broadcast parades and stuff that went by. So that worked out pretty good. So it was really a fun place.

I: So how big was the radio station then?

WC: I think we had gotten finally a thousand watts up there and that was a lot for us. At that time we were the only station in town. There was no college station and I'm not sure even if FM had been invented. If it had been, we didn't have it at that time.

We were remote, our tower was out on Cove Avenue, so everything went out there on telephone lines. That was back before satellites so everything were ground lines. We were into everything, elections, local and state news. We were a part of the community, much more, I think, than some stations are now. It's not quite as convenient, with the

satellite system to have as much localized information as we had then. It was really great.

Entertainment in the County

I: Let's talk a little bit about entertainment in Union County.

WC: I'm not an entertainer myself, not intentionally. I'm a jokester, as many people will tell you.

I: What did you do for entertainment?

WC: We had a lot to do. We had a roller-skating rink, two movie theaters and the Tropicara for those of us that liked to go to dinner and dancing.

I: Where was that located?

WC: The Tropicara is now called the Elkhorn Steakhouse located right on Adams. There was always picnicking, hiking, water sports. One of the big things was Wallowa Lake. We've always had two nice local parks, Riverside and Pioneer. If we'd wanted to go a out a little ways, there were the Elkhorns, to Anthony Lakes, to Baker City, to Wallowa County, to Elgin and up into the Tollgate area where the ski area is.

I: You said there was dinner and dancing at the Tropicara. What sorts of music could you expect there and was it live entertainment?

WC: Yes, it would mostly be country music but I do remember once the Ink Spots were there performing. They were a famous quartet way back in the '40s -- real big time. Actually, that was more of a concert than anything because I don't think anybody moved from their chairs. Once we got situated and they started in, nobody moved to do anything else. We were just infatuated because they were so good. The music was varied, either rock – soft rock – or country.

I: Did you dress up to go out on the town?

WC: Well, we did not go in a suit and tie, or at least I did not, though some people did. Unless you were going to a fancy dinner or something then you would. But usually it was pretty casual, you know, jeans and a shirt. A lot of them wore cowboy boots, but I never got into them.

I: You mentioned The Wheel, what was that?

WC: The Wheel was another hot spot and it was located where Ten Depot is now. First, it was Davis' Woodshed and then it became Chris' Woodshed. It was much the same, dinner and dancing. They had really good food. They had a great soup, chicken bisque I think it was called, and they never would give out the recipe for it.

I: What kind of food did they serve other than that?

WC: Pretty much steak, French fries, all the low calorie stuff. It was just a real fun place to go.

I: Did you bowl?

WC: Yes. We did have a real fine bowling alley, Blue Mountain Bowling Lanes, out where Les Schwab is located now. In fact, they bought the building next to Les Schwab for storage. There were a lot of bowling and a lot of leagues. Bowling was very, very popular back then. Cliff and Brownie Brim were the owners, as I remember and Lois Ferguson was the manager. It was just a really neat place to go; they had a nice snack bar and lockers so people that bowled all the time could store their shoes and stuff.

I: Were you a member of a league?

WC: No. I bowled, but I wasn't on a league; I didn't really have time to do it. The teams were sponsored by local businesses, there was always good support for them.

I: How big was the bowling alley?

WC: I'm thinking about ten lanes.

I: I've also heard mention of Cassie's Tavern.

WC: Now that was located out on what is now the Island City strip, maybe about where Legacy Ford is now. They had some cabins out there for people to rent as well as a tavern with great burgers and finger steaks. They would have peanut night and of course beer. You'd sit at the tables, drink beer and eat these peanuts. We were out there one night and I was being so neat and tidy, eating peanuts and putting the shells in the ashtray. The owner came by and said, "Warren, you better not do that anymore or you're going to have to buy the whole house a round of drinks. Throw them on the floor!" Everybody just threw them on the floor, it was just covered with peanut shells.

I: Has the shopping changed in La Grande over the years?

WC: Mainly because of the bigger stores like Wal-Mart and Bi-Mart. There were really some magnificent shopping stores in La Grande that you don't have now because of the bigger stores. People travel out of town to shop in the Tri-Cities or Pendleton. It has changed, but fortunately there are still some local businesses that remain and people are still patronizing them.

I: Do you recall other sorts of entertainment that people in town were interested in at that time?

WC: Gun clubs come to mind and we had two of them. Rodeos were big here with the Stock Show in Union, the Stampede in Elgin, and the Blue Mountain Rodeo in La Grande. Of course they always had big doings at Baker City and Chief Joseph Days up in Joseph.

I: Do you feel that Union County was divided by social class? Was that evident in the different forms of entertainment?

WC: I never noticed it, never was aware of it anywhere.

I: If you went out to the local dining hall or lounge all sorts of people would be there?

WC: Yes, all types of people, all colors -- yellow, pink, purple, black, or whatever.

Public Service

I: Let's talk about your involvement in public service.

WC: I've been involved in public service for many, many years and it started way back at when I was first working at the radio station in the early '50's. You could tell what month it was just by listening to the radio, by what public service spots we were playing. January was always March of Dimes, February was Heart Month, March and April Easter Seals, that type thing. All of a sudden they kind of all ran together.

I got pretty involved with all of the different programs, not just doing the announcements on KLBK, but actually working with the committees. Many years ago I was asked if I would become chairman of the American Red Cross blood program for Union County. I was a pretty heavy blood donor so I said, sure, no problem. So I did and I did that until just maybe five years ago. I lasted there for thirty-two years. We would organize the blood drives when the Blood Mobile from Boise would come. That's probably one of the biggest public service things that I have done.

I: Why the Red Cross?

WC: I was familiar with it and – this is kind of a funny tie-in –when I was in the Navy back in 1952 we were on Sasabo, Japan. They passed the word out that they need blood donors ashore, anybody that would give blood would get liberty for the rest of the day. I thought, cool. So a bunch of us signed up, went ashore to the hospital and gave blood.

I don't remember a thing about it except afterwards this Navy nurse handed us a little paper cup thing and told us to go out and sit on the front steps. So we did and I thought, this is kind of a strange thing to give blood and then they want a urine sample. We all went out and sat on the front steps and here came this Navy nurse with a bottle of whiskey who filled these little paper cups up and said, "Now you guys drink this." I was not a whiskey drinker, but she was a Navy officer with gold bars. Am I going to drink this dang thing? Well, I did, and after all these thirty-two years of being involved with the blood program I never did get whiskey again, just orange juice.

I: How did you go about arranging the blood drives in La Grande?

WC: First, we had to find a place like one of the churches, Lutheran, , Methodist or sometimes the Catholic parish hall. Then we had to get all the nurses we would need to work the program, arrange for refreshments, the whole ball of wax. When the blood mobile came in from Boise they just came in with the van and the six nurses that actually would draw the blood. We had to have nurses that could do other things too, take blood pressure and temperature and all this. It got to be quite a routine and we had such a good committee set up, we would make a couple of phone calls and, boom, it was done. I'm sure it's

much the same way now. Over the years I think I have donated almost eleven gallons of the blood and that doesn't count the one in Sasabo, Japan.

I: How many people would you expect to come to a blood drive?

WC: We would have a quota that we'd have to try to collect, like 150 units and we had a list of people we'd call.

I: How many people does it take to fill 150 units?

WC: 150 people, each person gives a pint unit of blood. That number hasn't changed over the years. Boise has several areas where they draw blood and they can only keep the blood for so long. Now they fractionize it into different units, which they couldn't or didn't do in those days. There is a limit as to the time they can keep it before it has to be destroyed.

I: Were you handling the blood at that time, or only handling the organizational side of the drive?

WC: Just the organization of the drive which didn't take any major training from the Red Cross.

I: What other activities were you involved in?

WC: I taught a class at the high school once on public speaking and teaching the students how to operate the tape recorder and the microphone. Other than the normal public service stuff that pretty well handled it.

I: Were you involved in any fraternal groups like the Kiwanis or Elks?

WC: One time I was a member of Kiwanis and the Elks club, those were the two main ones.

My wife and I were members of the La Grande Mavericks, a riding club, still, and they eventually had their own rodeo in the early 1970's. That was a lot of work, a year-round job. You get through with one and it's time to start planning the other. One of the main things about the Mavericks and the Blue Mountain Rodeo that I remember so well, was picking up rocks in the arena. I swear those rocks would just grow; every year we got to just pick up those rocks because we didn't want those cowboys getting bucked off their horses and getting hurt. We were very active with them for many, many years.

I: Have you seen a change in how the community support is structured around activities like that?

WC: I haven't been involved with them all that much these last few years, but they are all very active with the exception of the Blue Mountain Rodeo. The Union County Fair still pulls a lot of support and many volunteers that work together and the same goes with the Eastern Oregon Livestock Show, the Catherine Creek Junior Rodeo, a kids' rodeo, the Stampede in Elgin, Chief Joseph Days. They all still receive a lot of local volunteer support, so it's pretty much the same as it was.

I: Were you involved with any of the churches?

WC: We were involved pretty heavily with St. Peter's Episcopal Church because I had joined the Episcopal Church when I was in high school back in Wyoming. I remember back in Wyoming, it became the thing to join the Episcopal Church. So a bunch of us guys and gals did and I got to be an alter boy. This was really a thrill. I remember eight o'clock in the morning we had communion and we had to be there to assist the priest. He'd mix up the wine and the water and get everything ready for communion.

When you got through of course, we had to consume what was left. I thought all of a sudden I got to drink what was left of this wine or part of it, share it. I thought, well, being an alter boy's not all that bad. At the time I thought that was a pretty good reason to join the Episcopal Church. Of course I realized that there was a lot more to it than that. Then somewhere in the shuffle here in La Grande and I don't really remember the reasoning behind it, probably the divorce of my first wife and I, I kind of lost interest in the church altogether. Then all of a sudden something came up and we got interested in First Christian Church and we have been with them for many years now and very active.

I: Do you remember when you started there?

WC: I think it was in 1981.

I: What was the attitude in the area about the different churches in La Grande?

WC: I don't think there was any attitude necessarily, there were a lot of people that were churchy and a lot people that weren't. People didn't make a big thing about it. I figured if they want to go to church, fine, and if they don't, fine. But there was no real big animosity about church itself that I was aware of.

I: Can you describe to me what your involvement was at First Christian Church?

WC: At first, I ushered a little bit and then I became a member of (?) which helped serve communion and then eventually I became an elder. Aside from religious activities at the church, I volunteered to be the new paid janitor. The one we had was leaving and going to school. I thought I wouldn't mind doing that for pay and I was janitor for several years and liked it a lot. Then I got diabetes and it was a little hard to go up and down stairs and move tables, so I retired from that at age sixty-nine.

I: Were you involved with any of the youth groups in the church?

WC: I just supported them with their programs and activities, I was never a teacher or anything like that.

I: Can you think of anything else you were involved in La Grande that sticks out in your mind?

New Day Enterprises

WC: I do remember aside from the Red Cross that I was also very much involved with New Day Enterprises. I can't remember when I started that, but it was many, many years ago.

They started out kind of in the log cabin out at the fairgrounds because it was really small at the beginning.

They moved into part of the old St. Joseph Hospital where CHD is located now – at one end, then we finally moved to the other end. Eventually they moved to their new location on North Depot. There have been many years of so many wonderful things that have happened in that program, I can't believe what it's done for the people that are involved, the people that work with there, the staff who teach and work with these people.

It's just astounding to see the changes that have come about with the clients, the young men and women who are involved with that program. I'm thinking of one young man who worked in a local business in La Grande and has for many years. He just does an excellent job. The New Day Enterprises program is a big plus for Union County. I think the last count was five group homes in addition to their headquarters there on Depot. They have since now built a new office facility on Washington up there near Lynch Motors. So of all the things I've been involved with, I think the most rewarding – and it's kind of hard to say this because they all were rewarding – probably would be working with the American Red Cross and with New Day Enterprises.

I: How is New Day financed?

WC: It's financed from the state into CHD, the local mental health department, and then part of our funding comes from them. In addition, we have private contributors that donate.

I: Tell me a little about the clients of New Day.

WC: The clients are developmentally handicapped. I'm reluctant to use the word mentally handicapped because some of them really can think pretty well. They just are not able to physically do a lot of things. I think probably their families initially approached New Day to see if they could get their son or daughter enrolled in their program. The people who work there are a very special, unusual people who have had some training. They're paid staff. We're very fortunate through the years to have such a program and trained staff who are involved and do their job so well.

I: Is there anything else about the New Day Enterprises that you can think of?

WC: Other than the fact that it just seems to get bigger and bigger. I remember they have five different homes here in the community where these people actually live. They have staff people that live with them twenty-four hours a day. Each house has its own kitchen and back yards; they cook their own meals if they are capable or they're cooked for them.

They're taken out in the community to go sightseeing, to go bowling, that type thing. They try to get these people as involved as they can in the community because they never were before. They just stayed at home and didn't do anything. There was no trained staff other than the parents to take care of them. So with New Day, they have work at the center where they go to during the day, work on projects with their hands, and build things. They're just very active and not just sitting around and doing nothing.

I: You've been very involved with people most of your life.

WC: I really have.

I: Have you seen a change in how people interact in this area over the years?

WC: Not really. If there's any interaction as far as I'm concerned it's because I caused it, you know, I tried to at least. It's very hard for me to be unfriendly. I don't know where I learned all this, probably from my parents because they were both very popular. I wouldn't know how to live any other way.

I: One last question to wrap up something that we talked about earlier, when did you retire from the radio station?

WC: How many times?

I: Tell me more about that.

WC: I wish I could remember what year I retired the first time, probably in the 70's. (How can you forget something like that?) I decided that I had probably been at that long enough so decided to retire and I did. They had a big wonderful dinner party for me at Red Lion in Pendleton. Ken and the troops gave me a very fine gift of fishing gear because now I'm going to have time to go fishing.

However, my wife and I had gone up to Washington State to visit our daughter who had just had a baby. While I was up there I had heard that one of the local salesmen at KLBM was going to quit radio and go fulltime at the railroad. I got to thinking about that. I was not happy with retirement at all. I remember I called in from Washington and I said, "You're not going to believe this." I did go back to work at KLBM until 1988.

I retired at church two or three times. Eventually, it just got to the point where I couldn't handle the chairs and move tables and stuff like that. I just knew it was time to quit.

I: That was a paid position as janitor at the church?

WC: Yes. I was sixty-nine. Now I have two jobs that I like very much working at Wal-Mart as a greeter on Wednesday and Friday and delivering prescriptions in the afternoon Monday, Wednesday and Thursday for Red Cross Drugstore. I'm still pretty active and out among the people and enjoy it very much.

I. You mentioned the Ground Observer Corp, what was that?

Ground Observer Corp

WC: Back in the good old days we had the Ground Observer Corp, a series of volunteers working with the Air Force to spot planes and keep track of aircraft. We had our post on top of the Sac Annex up there which was next to the US Band Building. We had private phone lines into headquarters and when we would spot an incoming airplane we would call in that information to headquarters.

I: What was the purpose of that?

WC: It was during the Cold War and we just wanted to keep track of aircraft in the valley. The Ground Observer Corp was nationwide, I mean they were everywhere. We worked directly with the Air Force and were all volunteers; we had to go up and keep track of those airplanes all day long, twenty-four hours a day. The thing I remember most about it, is that sometimes we didn't have use of the elevator and we had to walk up seven flights to get to the roof.

I: Why didn't you have the elevators?

WC: I don't really remember now. Maybe we were younger and just wanted to get the exercise, up those seven flights. I couldn't begin to do that now. We thought it was such fun. I don't remember how long that lasted or when it ended.

I: How many volunteers do you think there were?

WC: I imagine we had about thirty, both men and women.