

DAVID ROSE

Union County resident for 85 years

AN ORAL HISTORY



Interview in January, 2003
at his home in La Grande OR

Interviewer: John Turner

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

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

Board of Representatives

Alice Alexander, Cove	Merle Miller, La Grande & Union
Gerda Brownton, La Grande	Shirley Peters, Elgin
Dorothy Swart Fleshman, La Grande	Jerry Peters, Cove & Union
John Turner, La Grande	John VanSchoonhoven, Cove

Eugene Smith, Executive Director
Jennie Tucker, Executive Assistant

Cooperating Faculty, EOU

Robert Davis, English & Cornerstone Program

Contributors

Union County Commissioners' Transient Tax Discretionary Fund Frontier Motors
Meyer Memorial Trust The Observer First Bank Wildhorse Foundation
Charles & Joyce Coate Dennis Cross Florence Davidson Peggy Delaney Betty Drummond
Helen & Pat Fitzgerald George & Dorothy Swart Fleshman Doris Foster Clayton Fox
Camille & William Hawkins Kevin Loveland Thelma & Emery Oliver Marj Parker
Helen & Elmer Perry Anita & Roby Pipes Retired Boise Cascade Employees
Lyle Sanderson Jennie Tucker Bernice & Gary Webster Gerald Young

Currently Active Volunteers

Gerda Brownton	Dorothy Swart Fleshman	Tom Madden	Carol Summer
John Turner	Patty Turner	Arlene Young	

For a list of people whose interviews are available as edited transcripts,
call 541-975-1694

or

write P.O. Box 2841, La Grande OR 97850

or

e-mail unionhistproj@eoni.com

copies of transcripts are \$4.00 each + shipping & handling

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 Interview and This Edited Version

The interview with David Rose took place at his home in La Grande. He is mentally alert but has some physical limitations.

The interviewer was John Turner, a volunteer with the Union County, Oregon History Project. He completed a one-hour interview on January 3, 2003.

Heather Pilling's full transcription (available for research purposes) presents the literal contents of the interview. 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.

DR designates David Rose's words, *I* the interviewer's.

CONTENTS

Resident of Union County at an Early Age	1
Return to La Grande to Become a Railroader	1
Becoming a Train Engineer	2
Working on the Joseph Branch Line and Doing Good Turns	6
A Few More Railroader Stories	7
Improvements in Railroad Equipment	9
Choice of Work	10
Index	11

Resident of Union County at an Early Age

- I: What's your name?
- DR: I am David Rose. I was born in 1916.
- I: Where were you born?
- DR: I was born in Pendleton, Oregon.
- I: When did you move to the La Grande area, and how old were you then?
- DR: About three years old. We moved to Starkey, Oregon. My mother ran the post office there at Starkey and had a grocery store, too. There used to be lots of sheep in that country; everybody had saddle horses and pack animals.
- I: Was that the original Starkey store?
- DR: That was the old Starkey store, yes. There wasn't even any Mt. Emily Camp and no logging there at all. It was just where the store was. It was just sheep outfits, cattle, and that sort of thing.
- I: Was that your father's line of work?



Site of former Starkey store in 2003
(now used as residence)
Photo courtesy of John Turner

- DR: My dad had a ranch there, ran cattle and horses, and raised grain and wheat. I was a Depression kid, although I can't truthfully say that I suffered very much. My dad was a farmer, so my parents had lots of hogs, chickens, beef cattle, and big gardens, and they both knew how to handle things. But if anybody had ever given me a dollar, it would have seemed as big as a wagon wheel.
- I: Where did you go to school?
- DR: I remember first going to the old school at Starkey. After we left there, we moved down to the Pendleton country and went to school down there.
- I: What was the school at Starkey like?
- DR: Just a one-room school--maybe ten or twelve pupils, with one teacher for all.
- I: How long did you stay at Pendleton?

Return to La Grande to Become a Railroader

- DR: I left Pendleton and came up to La Grande when I was about twenty-four years old. I had to come to La Grande to go into railroading. I first hired out on the Oregon Short Line as a brakeman, though I wanted to hire out as a fireman. The first thing I did was get acquainted with a couple of engineers. They took me over and hired me.
- I: When you started out railroading, were they using coal?
- DR: They used coal and oil.

I: When you started working for the railroad, how did you learn what to do?

DR: They showed you where the peg was on the steam gauge and said that that's where they liked to run it--right on about that peg. Some of the engineers were cranky, but most of them were really good guys.

I: Was there a little extra prestige in those days in being an engineer?

DR: Oh, you better believe it! When I first started in, they showed how to handle hand-fired engines, but about the only time they ever picked up a scoop shovel was when they showed me what to do with it. After that, I had the scoop shovel.

Of course, in those days we didn't get over the road very fast. When we went from La Grande to Reith [near Pendleton, west of La Grande], if we could do it in ten hours, we had made a pretty good trip. Later on, we ran from La Grande to Reith in two hours and thirty-five minutes in the big diesel engines.

We ran both ways, east and west, out of here. I was liable to be called for going either direction. I didn't bid any jobs because I was on the extra board [i.e., company system for assigning crews]. If some fireman laid off, I got a call whether it was east or west or whether it was just a helper [i.e., an extra engine to help in getting a train over the hills that surround the Grande Ronde Valley].

Becoming a Train Engineer

I: About how long did you work as a fireman before you became an engineer?

DR: In 1941 I went in the military for a four-year stretch. When I came back, the men I had worked with had been promoted beyond me. I had to do a lot of studying or I was going to lose a lot of seniority. So I studied to beat hell and passed all the examinations for both diesel and steam engines--when there was more to it than now. It was a rough go. I had to pass an inspection because of government requirements.

I: The engineer's responsibility on a train isn't just to hold the throttle. What else is involved?



Dave Rose (left) as engineer, with Ray Forrester, fireman, ca. 1945
Photo courtesy of Dave Rose

DR: The engineer has to know how many cars he has and their weights.

I: How does the engineer determine those things?

DR: The yardmaster told him, “You’re leaving here with 4,000 tons” or whatever it was. He knew the type of the engines he had and how many, and he knew that, for a 4,000-ton load, he was going to go single.

I: What do you mean by *single*?

DR: No helper engine. Later on, we got slave units--though we were ordered not to call them *slave units*--that ran by radio system, with nobody on them. We control them on the switchboard in front of us.

I: How does the engineer control braking?

DR: It will take a big, heavy train a mile to stop, unless you go right into emergency; even with that, the train goes a long way. I ran through a band of sheep one time down below North Fork. There had been snow in the hills--white patches. When I looked down the track at a white patch on the track, I thought it was snow until the light hit them so I could see the reflection off their eyes. I ran through a band of sheep that was bedded down on the hill and killed seventy-eight head. I know the rear of the train was past the sheep when we got stopped.

I: Of course, then you had to make out a report.

DR: Then I had to make out a report: Was the whistle blowing? Was the bell ringing? Hell, I didn’t know whether I rang the bell or blew the whistle. It didn’t make any difference in the middle of the night to a bunch of sheep on the track. I just went into emergency and ran through the sheep.

I: Didn’t inspectors put out fuseses [i.e., flares, see below] or torpedoes [i.e., explosive devices affixed to the track, no longer legal] to test your stopping?

DR: Yes, for a test. If it was two torpedoes, the engineer was supposed to reduce speed. As he reduced his speed, there might be a red flag up the track. If it was there, he had to stop to check it out. All that some of those officials had to do was to try to fire some guy--a guy making an honest living.

I: They were supposed to see that you followed the rules to the letter, weren’t they?

DR: Right.



Fusee, or flare--used for warning crews of other trains of various emergencies; in common use by railroad crews (Cap contains igniting device.)
Phot by Eugene Smith

I: In the early days, we got messages tied to a hoop from the operators at little depots. We scooped it up by hooking it over our arms. The messages told us what to do. Later, that was all done by radio and Central Train Control. We talked directly to the dispatcher, though some things he didn't have to tell us. If we saw a yellow light, the next one was either going to be a double red or a red over yellow. The red over yellow meant that we would take the passing track. In the passing track, we went to the end, stopped, and stayed there till they cleared it.

There's quite a bit on an engineer's mind. I was always worried to death about hitting some woman with a bunch of kids in a car going to school. Especially in the last few years I worked in Idaho, there were fast tracks and lots of crossings; it was quite a worry. I did hit several cars, though



Ray Broms, Station Agent at Kamela, holding hoop used for conveying train orders to engineers (closeup at right), ca. 1940s

Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

I don't think I ever killed anyone. A driver would pull right up to the tracks, seem to take his foot off the brake, and the car would roll toward the train. I don't understand how they did that; of course, any driver should stop back a ways because those trains are going by pretty fast.

Railroading is a very interesting job--a lot more so than most people realize. They think all the engineer has to do is get in the cab, blow the whistle, ring the bell, and open the throttle. There's a hell of a lot more to it than that--air brakes, for example. You might figure that you set the brakes by adding air. You don't add air; you take it off--ninety pounds slowly down to twenty. If you want to be a good train handler, you take pride in braking smoothly.

I: What about the hours an engineer works?

DR: The hours were terrible--working any hour of night or day, Christmases, and whatnot. But we expected it, and they paid damn' well, especially in our last few years; it was a good-paying job. I could support my family and own a decent home. When we got ready to retire, if we had any sense, we had a few dollars saved and retired well.



Closeup of train-orders hoop (used before days of electronic train control)

A decent pension and supplemental insurance helped a great deal.

I: How did the railroad figure an engineer's pay?

DR: An engineer got paid by the weight on the drivers [i.e., wheel units]. One unit paid quite a bit less than up to six on the big engines--Jacks, I called them. They paid by the hundred. We also got terminal delay; if we laid over too long in the terminal, they had to start paying us. We kept time books, and, if we could figure our pay within \$5 or \$6, we were considered brilliant. I worked it out very closely a few times.

I think you have to be born into railroading to really make a good railroader. It's got to be in you. A lot of times, I sat on the edge of a bed after I'd been called--maybe I'd only been in bed only three hours when I was called to go back out--and thought, "Why in hell don't I quit?" Then I got to thinking about Evaline [Dave's wife] and the two kids, and I'd get up and go to work. Railroaders work nights a lot, but we don't get used to it because, after working nights for awhile, we're changed back to days.

A lot of men worked here in the roundhouse at La Grande. Later, when we got Central Train Control and diesel trains, there was no roundhouse and very few jobs. The roundhouse was torn down. But that's the way big companies work. You hear people cuss the unions, but, when you work for a big company like a railroad, you'd better belong to a good union. I belonged to the engineers' union, of

course, because one man can't contest an organization like that.

I: Did you have job insurance?

DR: I had \$100-a-day job insurance. One time, the signal kept turning red when we were trying to switch some cars. I got mad and went back and forth through it. When I got through, I called the dispatcher and said, "I was going to ask you about that light." He said, "You treated it like a clear; it must've been clear." I said, "Yes." He said, "Besides that, I had an official in here, who told me that you had a \$100-a-day job insurance." I did, too.

I: When something bad happened, did they fire everybody in sight?

DR: Yes. One time they fired George Driscoll, who was ninety-five cars away from where an accident happened. Mr. Roberts was the big wheel, sitting in his private car. I knew he was a lodge brother of mine, though he and I weren't buddies. I went in there and said, "Why don't you put George Driscoll back to work? You fired him when he was ninety-five cars away from where a switch was run through. How in the hell can you do that?" He said, "It's easy." I said, "Yes, but is it fair?" He said, "I'll tell you what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna put him back to work in ten days. Now you get out of here. If anybody asks me whether you were in here, I'm gonna tell 'em no." They put him back to work, but it would have taken much longer if I hadn't gone in. Railroad men are pretty good at helping out people.

Working on the Joseph Branch Line and Doing Good Turns

- I: When you were working, were you ever on the branch line from La Grande to Joseph?
- DR: Yes, that was a pretty slow run. The track wasn't all that good, and it was very crooked. We had no Central Train Control or passing tracks, but we weren't going to meet anybody except a speeder [i.e., a small railroad car carrying railroad workers] or a section crew that was out on the road.
- I: Did you go up from La Grande in one day and come back the same day?
- DR: No. We went up one day and came back the next. Often it took twelve to fifteen hours to make one trip up because of all the switching we had to do. Coming back, we picked up the cars we had switched out and usually came back in eight or nine hours. I took that job because I got tired of the extra board. Otherwise, I wouldn't have taken it. As soon as I could get off, I took a mainline job as a regular crew member.
- I: But it paid pretty well, didn't it?
- DR: It paid very well, yes, although the main line paid more.
- I: And you knew when you'd be working?
- DR: We knew what times we'd be called, and, if they didn't call, we got paid anyway--one hundred miles' pay--but

ordinarily they didn't miss.

- I: Did you pick up and drop off fishermen at Lookingglass [river north of Elgin]?
- DR: Oh, yes. A lot of trout and steelhead fishermen. We'd haul them there and pick them up, and it didn't cost them anything, though it was frowned on. When the branch line first went out there, there used to be a baggage car; I think they had to pay when they rode that. When they got rid of the baggage car, we just picked them up and told them to get back on a unit, tend to their own business, and not to bother anything. Sometimes they rode in the cab with me.

The section crews on the branch line were different than on the main line. If there were any problems, like a bad piece of track, we told them and they fixed them.



Joseph Branch Line crew, ca. 1940s
Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

I: Tell the story about the flashlight.

DR: Between Enterprise and Joseph, a little girl often waved a flashlight at us from her window, giving us the highball when we went by at night. LeVern Draper [the conductor] and I got to talking around Christmastime. “Why don’t we buy her a present?” We went into a store, where there was a beautiful doll, but it was expensive. I said, “We’ll buy that one.” He said, “What are the other guys gonna say?” I said, “They make big money. That ain’t gonna hurt them anyway. We’ll do it.” LeVern said, “If they won’t pay, we’ll do it.” I said, “OK.” So we bought the big doll, put the arm on the rest of them, and made them pay.

When we pulled up close to her house, we got off, went over, and gave this little girl, who was seven or eight, the beautiful doll.

One time I was on a helper engine, and a man was pulling stumps out with a big cable and a team of horses. He couldn’t pull them out that way. I was on the passing track and said to him, “Hook that cable around that stump, and I’ll pull it out for you.” He said, “I don’t know whether you can pull that or not.” I said, “Put the cable on.” I pulled about seven or eight stumps for him with no problem. He was amazed.

Another time we had put a car off the end of the track at the mill at Wallowa [small town in Wallowa County], and they couldn’t get it back on, even with two D8 Cats hooked onto it. They wondered if we could pull that car up.

“Yes,” I said, “I can pull it up.” We were going to have a big train out, with three diesel engines hooked together. So I sanded the rails, and they put the cable around the car. I hardly opened up the throttle beyond the third notch and just sucked it right out of there and up on the track. Those guys were amazed; they had no idea what three of those big engines would do.

If we had a coal-fired engine, we piled a bunch of coal up in the gangway as we went by several houses closest to the track and kicked the coal off. Women were out there with buckets to pick up the coal. This was during hard times.

A Few More Railroader Stories

DR: One time a rock as big as an automobile lit right on the track below Meacham [town approx. twenty-five miles west of La Grande, in Umatilla County]. Pete Putrick had to be the big wheel that did all the talking on the phone. He said, “Mr. Dispatcher, a big rock on the track” and hung up. The dispatcher didn’t know where the hell it was but cleared all the signals red. Finally, they woke up to where it was and had to blast some of it to get it off. But that was Pete: “a big rock on the track.”

There was a section crew at Duncan [approx. fifteen miles west of Meacham], who were trying to get coal there but weren’t getting it. The railroad furnished the signal maintainers with coal in winter and ice during the summertime, but sometimes they were

Union Pacific Railroad Depots of the Early 20th Century



Union Pacific railroad track at Gibbon (26.5 miles from Kamela (west of La Grande), 1940s
Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens



Depot at Durkee (approx. 25 miles east of Baker City), 1940s
Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens



Depot at Duncan (approx. 15 miles west of Meacham), 1940s
Photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

pretty slow about getting it to them. I had talked to the section guys there, who were griping about it. We were coming with a dandy load of coal in a car right behind the engine. I said to the brakeman, "The wheels are running hot on that car. We'd better set it out here." We set it out. I always wondered how many tons of coal were missing when they got ready to take it out of there.

Another time I was almost fired. We had a trainmaster--a stupid, little jerk. His uncle must have been a big wheel in the railroad or he'd never have gotten a job. The roadmaster asked me if I would pick up two women at Meacham, who had bought groceries and needed to get to Huron. There must have been five or six feet of snow in there. I said, "Sure." So I stopped at the farm, helped the women load their groceries, took them to Huron, and let them off. The husbands come out and took the groceries off.

When I got in, I went up to the trainmaster's office. He asked me what the hell was I doing. Running a passenger service? I said, "I don't know what you're talking about." He said, "You picked up two women at Meacham, didn't ya?" I said, "Yes, I did. I picked up their groceries, too." He said, "That's illegal. You can't do that." I said, "Well, it's already done. Those were section-men wives, and the tools that those guys work with wouldn't fit your hand because they're a tool for the hand of a man." I was mad! I thought probably I'd get fired but didn't. He said, "I'm gonna see how many demerits you can get." The big

wheel at Portland told him to forget it, saying, "Of course, he hauled them. He was asked if he would."

Improvements in Railroad Equipment

DR: It was a good job. Later, on my regular job in the diesels, when I went by a steam engine, I rolled up the window so as not to smell it. We had good heaters, good windshield wipers, good lights, and radios, which are especially important in Idaho, where there's so much fog in the wintertime. It's like looking through a wet blanket.

That's when I talked to my dispatcher. He'd say, "You're right. You're gonna meet a train at so-and-so, and we're gonna head you in the passing track." The engineer didn't dare miss a signal; if I missed a signal, I didn't know where I was because I couldn't see. That's when I'd yell at the brakeman--when we no longer had firemen--afraid I'd miss one. "You watch for that signal over there." If I knew who was ahead of me--that is, if I was following a train--I listened very carefully to the dispatcher; that way sometimes I found out just where he was.

Some of the crew would go to bed and go to sleep. The engineer was the guy that usually sat up an hour or two after he got in to kind of let down. He'd been right on edge.

Some of the big trains now may have one hundred-twenty or one hundred-thirty cars. Just think of where all those cars have come from!

- I: With one hundred-twenty cars, how long would the train be?
- DR: A mile-and-a-quarter or further. It got so some of the passing tracks wouldn't hold trains like that, so they'd usually hold a shorter train till a big train got by. We were lucky because most of the time there were several tracks that held a lot of cars. Durkee held a string of cars.
- I: What did you think about the change to Central Train Control?
- DR: Those old train orders were a pain. I had to watch my time card all the time when the passenger trains were running in order to clear them. There was a lot more thinking than working at it until Central Train Control came in.

Choice of Work

- I: Is there anything else you would rather have done?

- DR: When I was a kid, we didn't have many chances to go to college; the dad had to finance it, so most of us didn't get the schooling we would have liked to have. In the Depression, there was no way to go to college unless your folks were wealthy. I would have liked to be a lawyer, but that wasn't possible. Just getting through high school was doing well; I did that. They didn't pay you to go to school then, and you didn't borrow money from the government to go to school.

Aside from that, railroading is what I wanted to do. The railroad is fascinating--all those cars that come from different places and by different railroads.

Index

A

animals, pack 1

B

baggage car 6

bell 4

 ringing of 3

board, extra 6

books, time 5

brakeman 1, 9

brakes, air 4

braking 3

branch line 6

Broms, Ray, Station Agent at Kamela, photo of 4

brother, lodge 5

buckets 7

C

cab 6

cable 7

car

 baggage 6

 private 5

cars

 hitting of 4

 railroad, weights of 3

 switching of 5

Cats, D8 7

cattle, beef 1

Central Train Control 4-6, 10

chickens 1

Christmastime 4, 7

coal 1, 7, 9

college 10

conductor 7

crew, section 6, 7

crossings 4

D

D8 Cats 7

delay, terminal 5

demerits 9

depot

 at Duncan, photo of 8

 at Durkee, photo of 8

Depression 1, 10

diesels 9

dispatcher 4, 5, 9

Dispatcher, Mr. 7

doll, beautiful 7

double red 4

Draper, LeVern 7

Driscoll, George 5

drivers 5

Duncan OR 7

Durkee OR 10

E

emergency, going into 3

engine 9

 coal-fired 7

 helper 3, 7

 steam 9

engineers 1-4

engines

 diesel 2, 7

 diesel and steam 2

engines, hand-fired 2

Enterprise 7

examinations 2

extra board 2, 6

F

father, Dave's 1

fired, getting 9

firemen 1, 9

firing of employees 5

fishermen

 steelhead 6

 trout 6

flag, red 3

flashlight 7

fog 9

fusee, photo of 3

G

gangway 7

gardens 1

gauge, steam 2

girl, little 7

groceries 9

guys, section 9

H

handler, train 4

heaters 9

helper 2
highball 7
high school 10
hogs 1
hoop
 messages tied to 4
 train-orders, photo of 4
horses
 saddle 1
 team of 7
hours, working 4
Huron OR 9

I

ice 7
Idaho 4, 9
inspection 2
inspectors 3
insurance, job 5
insurance, supplemental 5

J

Jacks 5
job
 good-paying 4
 mainline 6
Joseph OR 6,7
Joseph Branch Line crew, photo of 6

K

Kamela OR 8

L

lawyer 10
La Grande OR 1, 5, 6
light, yellow 4
lights 9
line, branch 6
logging 1
Lookingglass 6

M

maintainers, signal 7
Meacham OR 7,9
men, railroad 5
military 2
mill at Wallowa 7
Mt. Emily Camp 1

N

nights, work 5
North Fork 3
notch, third 7

O

officials 3
oil 1
orders, train 10
Oregon Short Line 1
outfits, sheep 1

P

pay, engineer's 5
peg 2
Pendleton OR 1
pension 5
people, helping of 5
Portland OR 9
post office, Starkey OR 1
prestige 2
pride 4
Putrick, Pete 7

R

radios 9
radio system 3
railroading 1, 4, 10
 being born into 5
railroad track at Gibbon OR, photo of 8
rails, sanding of 7
ranch 1
red over yellow 4
Reith OR 2
report, making out of 3
requirements, government 2
roadmaster 9
Roberts, Mr. 5
rock 7
Rose
 Dave, as engineer, photo of 2
 Evaline 5
roundhouse 5

S

seniority 2
sheep 1
 band of 3
shovel, scoop 2
signal 5, 7
 missing of 9
single, going 3

slave units 3
snow 3, 9
speed, reducing of 3
speeder 6
Starkey OR 1
Starkey store, site of former, photo of 1
store, grocery 1
stumps 7
switch, running through 5
switchboard 3
switching 6

T

throttle 2, 4, 7
times, hard 7
torpedoes 3
track
 bad piece of 6
 crooked 6
 fast 4
 passing 4, 6, 7, 9, 10
trainmaster 9
trains
 diesel 5
 passenger 10
trout 6

U

union, engineers' 5
unions 5
unit 6
units, slave 3

W

Wallowa OR, mill at 7
weight 5
wheel
 big 5, 7, 9
 wagon 1
wheels, running hot 9
whistle, blowing of 3, 4 3
wipers, windshield 9
wives, of section-men 9

Y

yardmaster 3

