CLIFTON "DUCK" SLACK

Union County resident for 87 years

AN ORAL HISTORY

Interviews in August & September, 2002
at his home in Perry OR

Interviewer: Rosina Armon

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

The interviews with Clifton "Duck" Slack took place at his home in Perry. At age 89, Duck is physically active and alert mentally.

The interviewer was Rosina Armon, a volunteer with the Union County, Oregon History Project. She completed the two one-hour interviews on August 24 and September 8, 2002.

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.

CS designates Clifton "Duck" Slack's words, *I* the interviewer's.

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Born in Union County

I: They call you *Duck*?

CS: They call me *Duck* for short.

I: Where'd that come from?

CS: My dad hung that on me when I was just a little kid. He said I waddled around like a duck. It's hung with me. One of my school teachers called me that. She was a neighbor, knew me by that name, and called me that in school.

I: Have you lived in Union County all your life?

CS: Yes. I've been away a few times, but this has always been home.

I: What are your mom's and dad's names?

CS: My dad's name was Jim Slack, and my mother's name was Ruia Slack. Her maiden name was Tiffany.

I: Do you have brothers and sisters?

CS: Yes. I had two brothers that died before I was born. They died young: Bert and Lester. I had a brother Clifford, two years older, and a sister, Maudie, who was three years younger. They both died the same year. I can't remember what year it was. I think 1970 something. I'm the only one left.

I: Now how old are you?

CS: I'm eighty-nine. I'll be ninety the first of the year--if I get that far.

I: Where were you born?

CS: About four miles north of Summerville--out there in the snow drift.

I: Did your mom and dad homestead there?

CS: No. They bought a place up there from my granddad. He was always dealing around in property. He got a hold of a piece of property up there--the forty acres we went on. We lived on that for quite a while, and then Dad got another forty. He worked out in the sawmill quite a bit--some of those little sawmills around there. He was a sawyer. He worked there and ran that little place, too.

I: Where did your mom and dad come from?

CS: Dad was born down in Crawfordville down the valley. Mom came from Utah. She was a Mormon, but she didn't follow that religion. She was in here about the time that the group came in here and started that sugar beet factory.

Dad worked for them for awhile. He was a foreman and got badly hurt there. A drunk guy came in there, raising the devil, and Dad told him to get out. He left but came back while Dad was down in the boiler room. The guy had a knife and jumped Dad. He kept kicking him back, and the guy cut an artery in Dad's leg. Another guy ran in about that time and jerked the guy off him. He lost so much blood that we darn near lost him, but he finally came out of it. He didn't work there anymore.

I: Do you know why your dad came up here from the valley?

CS: His dad moved up here when Dad was just a little kid, and Dad had been here ever since.

Growing Up on a Ranch near Summerville

I: Did you live on a ranch?

CS: Yes, we lived on a ranch there until I was ten or twelve years old, then we moved to Summerville for a couple of years, and then to Elgin.

I: What was your house you grew up in like?

CS: It was a four-room shack in the mountains.

I: Was it a wood-framed house?

CS: It was one that came together up at the top three or four ways--an old house.

I: When you were a kid, what was it like inside of the house as far as women's work was concerned? Do you remember anything your mom did?

CS: Yes. She had an old washboard and washed by hand. Dad finally got her a washing machine that ran with a lever. That was the kids' job most of the time.

I: I bet you hated wash day!

CS: Oh, yes.

I: Did you have a fruit cellar?

CS: Yes. It was dug out into the ground and then built up. It was always full of stuff to eat. That's how we lived those days. They used to dig a hole out in the garden someplace, put the potatoes in it, lay straw over them, and then cover that with dirt. They could dig back in the wintertime and get a bunch of spuds out that weren't frozen. They'd stand an awful lot of cold weather.

I: People figured things out on how to live back then.

CS: They had to.

Clifton Slack at age two, 1916, with his older brother, Clifford
Photo courtesy of Duck Slack

Clifford (l.) & Clifton Slack in 1920
Photo courtesy of Duck Slack

I: Nowadays we think we couldn't live without a refrigerator.

CS: And we canned a lot of meat.

I: Was that the only way you had to preserve the meat, or did you have a smokehouse?

CS: We smoked all the pork, not the beef. They'd make bacon and hams.

I: Of course, you had a wood cook stove. How did you get your wood in?

CS: It was skidded in with horses, and we sawed it up by hand. Dad got a hold of an old horse-powered saw--like the old gas saws but it ran with horse power. He'd hook the horse on a rig and he'd go around and around; that turned the crosscut saw. He could saw it up with that pretty well.

I: What were your toys at home like?

CS: We didn't have many. If we got one toy for Christmas, we were happy as we could be.

I: What were your Christmases like? Do you remember any Christmas in particular?

Slack family in 1918, Clifton at left front, sister, Maudie, center, brother, Clifford, at right
Photo courtesy of Duck Slack

CS: We'd have a big feed and a little Christmas tree with a few presents on it. That was about it.

I: Do you remember any of the decorations? Were they store bought?

CS: We strung popcorn.

Summerville in the Early 20th Century

I: Was Summerville the size it is now?

CS: There wasn't much difference--a little bigger than it is now. At that time they had a barber shop, a blacksmith shop, and a harness shop. That was about it.

I: Isn't there a grocery store still there?

CS: Oh, yes. There's been a grocery store there forever.

I: When you were a kid, what was that like?

CS: Just an old country store. It had a big, potbellied stove in it, and all the guys went in there, sat around, and shot the bull. They had everything. A lot of stuff was in barrels. You'd go in there, and the owner dipped it out for you.

I: Did he sell a little bit of everything?

CS: Yes. He had pretty good variety of stuff for those days.

I: Did he sell hardware, too?

CS: Not too much. You had to go to La Grande to get most of the hardware.

I: Did he have soap, or did your mom make her own soap?

CS: She used to make some, but they sold it in the store, too.

I: How did she make the soap?

CS: She used lye in it, but I can't remember how she made it. I think she used hog fat or something like that.

I: I suppose there was a gas station in Summerville.

CS: Yes. There was a gas station in all the little towns.

Changes in Union County Towns

I: Alicel was bigger than it is now, wasn't it?

CS: Yes. They used to ship a lot of grain into Alicel, so they had big warehouses.

I: I suppose there were so many small towns because you couldn't haul the hay clear across the valley. I always figured that there were small towns about the distance that it would take to ride a horse during the day. Is that what it was like?

CS: Yes. One reason there were so many little towns was that they were too far apart and too hard to get to. People had to go by horses or on foot and had to have a little store of some kind.

Summerville at one time was a lot bigger that it is. They had a brewery there in Summerville. A guy named Ott put that brewery in and made beer there. I can remember when the old building was still there. They finally tore it down. Summerville also had a saloon or two, a hotel, and big lodge buildings. At one time there was a little Chinatown in Summerville to the north, where the road turns and goes to Elgin. Chinese used to live there.

I: Were there any Chinese in this area when you were a kid?

CS: Just a few here and there.

I: What size was Elgin when you were a kid?

CS: It wasn't as big as it is now, but there wasn't a lot of difference. A lot of Elgin burned down along the main street not too many years ago.

Learning to Drive a Car

CS: Until I was ten years old, we didn't have a car. After Dad finally traded for a 1917 Model-T Ford, he was out helping with threshing and hadn't been home for a day or two. Mom said that, if we knew how to run that car, we'd drive to town. I said, "I can drive that car." I was ten years old. She said, "You think you can?" I said, "I know I can." I'd been riding around with Dad, and those old Model-Ts were pretty simple anyway. They had just finished threshing the field off, so she said, "Let's take it out in the field and drive it around a little. If you can drive it, we'll go to town." We ran it around the field awhile, took off for Summerville, and made it back all right. That was my first driving. I've been driving ever since.

Those Model-Ts had three pedals--one for low gear, one for reverse, and the other was the brake. There was a lever that you threw ahead for high.

Work & Injuries

I: What did you have to do to help your Dad?

CS: We did a lot on the outside. Dad wasn't there half the time, so my brother and I put up hay. I was eight or ten years old when I was helping. One time we were coming in with a load of hay. Of course, we had a horse and a wagon. My brother was driving and I was sitting up on top of that load of hay. We ran over a little bump that threw me and the hay. I fell off and broke both arms--not bad but broken. Dad was out on the threshing machine, so Mom loaded us up in the Model-T Ford and took us out to see Dad. He looked my arms over and wanted to know if I could wiggle my fingers. I could. He said, "They ain't broken." He sent me home, and I just put up with it.

I: They healed on their own?

CS: Yes. I couldn't use them. I think they had to feed me for quite a while. But that's the way they did things then. They didn't rush you into the doctor.

I got shot when I was twelve years old --the same day we moved to Summerville.

I: Who shot you?

CS: A crazy kid. We went hunting and had a .410 shotgun. When we got back to the outskirts of town, another kid that I knew well wanted me to go downtown with him. I said, "OK," and this crazy Johnny said, "No, you're going home with me." I said, "No. I told Rex that I'd go downtown with him." "If you do, I'll shoot you." He just hauled off and shot me right in the arm from not far away. I don't know how they ever saved that arm. The bone was broken off and turned around.

I: How long were you in the hospital?

CS: I was in there quite a little while. When they let me out, there were some people that we knew well who had lived on a ranch to the side of us. They'd moved in to La Grande and lived where the Greenwell Motel is now. I had to see the doctor every day, so I stayed with them for a couple of weeks before I went home.

They didn't have penicillin in those days. They brought me out of it, but it was over a year that I couldn't use it at all. I went to the doctor for a long time. They'd give me ether and work that arm. That damned ether was about to kill me. So I told Dad I wasn't going back up there any more. He said, "If you don't, I'm gonna work it here at home." I said, "OK." So he worked that arm for over a year. He'd sit me down and take that arm and ram it up here as far as he could and then pull it. Man, I'll tell you! He made a useful arm of it, but it's not right yet. I can move that hand sideways, and that's as far up as it will go. It's a little bit stiff. I've always used it and never had any trouble, but I went through an awful lot with that. I went to school one year in Summerville and wrote left-handed. I got to where I could do pretty well at it.

I: What did they do to the boy that shot you?

CS: They didn't do a thing with him. They never even investigated it. Now, they would have arrested him quickly. But then they didn't pay much attention to anything like that.

Going to Dry Creek School

I: Where did you go to school?

CS: I went to Dry Creek School for six years.

I: Where's that?

CS: That's up north of Summerville. The old schoolhouse is still there. It's on that road that goes up toward Sanderson Springs.

I: Is it a wooden building?

CS: Yes, a one-room building that had eight grades. One teacher took care of all of them. Boy, there was a bunch of ornery kids there, too!

I: How many kids were there, do you remember?

CS: Probably run between twenty to thirty.

I: Did the older kids help teach the younger ones?

CS: No, they weren't much on that.

I: Did the teachers just give you the lessons that you were supposed to do?

CS: Yes. They'd call on the class each day to go up in front and give us a little going over to see if we'd learned anything.

I: Do you remember the names of any of your teachers?

CS: I can remember a couple of them. Fern McKinnis is the one that called me *Duck*. And there was Bonita Tweeter.

I: How did you get to school?

CS: It was three miles to school. We walked part of the time and rode horses a lot. Once in awhile in the wintertime, Dad would hook up the sled and haul us in, but at times we'd get so many drifts in the road a horse couldn't get through it, so we'd have to walk over the drifts all the way to school.

I: Why was the school out there instead of in Summerville?

CS: In those days there were little schools all over. It was too far to have to go to different schools. I went to Summerville for about a year and a half when we were living there. But most of the kids out in the country went to a little old school nearby. They had to walk plenty far anyway, and, if they had to go to Summerville, they wouldn't have been able to get there.

I: Was the school heated with a wood stove?

CS: Yes. It was a big, potbellied wood stove with a big shield around it.

I: Did you have to pack your own lunch?

CS: We lived so far away that we always carried our own lunch.

I: What did you carry it in?

CS: The best lunchbox was the little, square Dixie-Queen-tobacco box with

Dry Creek School, 2002
Photo by Eugene Smith

handles. There were some others, like Prince Albert, but they weren't nearly as nice as what we usually used.

I: What did you usually take for lunch?

CS: Sandwiches, cake, or whatever Mom had to send.

I: Did Dry Creek School have desks or tables?

CS: We had long rows of desks with seats; your desk and the one in front of you were hooked together. Usually the teachers had each grade in one row. That way the teacher could come back there and sit there and hear your class while you were sitting in your desk.

I: Did you study just the basic things--math and reading?

CS: Reading and writing and math and geography.

I: What did you kids write on?

CS: We had tablets and, of course, the blackboard.

I: What did the teachers do to control you?

CS: Knocked the devil out of us. They'd whip us in those days.

I: Were the older kids ornerier than the little ones?

CS: Some of the little ones were kind of ornery, too. I was one of them. A teacher kept Zach Pew and me in one night; she kept us in there till 9:00 at night and whipped us four times.

I: What did you do to get that punishment?

CS: She was hearing a class right across from me and had her arm up so I could see her watch. It was stopped, so I held up my hand and told her her watch was stopped. She told me I had enough to do to get my lesson and not to worry about that watch. That was before the last recess. So we boys decided it was recess when four o'clock came. We stayed in there till four some days. One of the kids had a watch and we were going to get up and walk out. We started to and she met us at the door with her pointer and made us sit down. She said we had to sit there till we studied. Zach and I sat there till nine o'clock and never did study.

It was in the wintertime with snow, and I had to walk three miles. I met my brother coming down and looking for me. Man, my dad was mad! I could see why he would be. He was on the school board, too.

He went to the school the next day and told that teacher, if she couldn't handle me, he would, but he didn't want her keeping me in there that late anymore.

I: When you went out to play at recess, what was there to play on?

CS: Very little. We'd just play games. We played a lot of baseball in the good weather.

I: What other kinds of games did you play?

CS: Just those little, foolish games kids used to play, like Ring around the Rosie. We had some pretty good programs at school for Christmas. One year the teacher named Bonita was going with a guy named Charles. Zach Pew and Emery Oliver--two of the orneriest ones we had--were putting on a little show. I think Zach was proposing

to Emery, who was dressed like a girl. The night of play they used Bonita's and Charlie's names. "Oh, Bonita, do you love me?" She said, "Yes, Charles." Man, I'll tell you, the house just went wild. Poor old Bonita.

I: Were the little plays and shows you put on about the Christmas story?

CS: Some of them were. Other plays didn't have anything to do with Christmas.

I: Did people bring things to eat?

CS: They'd give away popcorn balls. That was about all.

I: Did you go to another school after you left Dry Creek?

CS: I went for a year and a half at Summerville and then to Elgin. I finished up there in about two years.

Leaving School for the Pendleton Roundup

CS: I started to go to high school in Elgin when the Pendleton Roundup came along. My uncle and I saddled our horses and went across the hill. I never went back.

I: Tell me about that.

CS: We did that two or three times. My uncle was a cowboy, and he always took me to the Pendleton Roundup. So from the time I was about sixteen, he and I went together. We'd take off from Elgin with a couple of saddle horses and a pack horse and head right over the hill. We'd make it to Bingham Springs the first day, camp there, and go on into Pendleton the next day. We took it all in, and then we'd come back.

I: So it took two days to go to Pendleton from here on a horse?

CS: Yes. If we rode awfully hard, we might make it in a day, but it would be a long ride so we'd make two days of it.

I: Where was the road then?

CS: We went straight west out of Elgin. It's an old trail that goes up and comes out on the summit. It was road up to the summit, and from there on down it was just a trail where the old Ruckle Road used to be.

I: What was the Pendleton Roundup like in those days?

CS: They saddled up the horses in the middle of the arena and snug them up to another horse. It's quite a bit more modern now, with chutes for horses to buck out of. Then, they had a Northwest champion and a world champion.

I: Did the Indians come in like they do now?

CS: Yes. I think maybe more so.

I: Did you ever ride in the Pendleton Roundup?

CS: Yes. I rode bareback. I tried a couple of Brahma bulls and changed my mind about them pretty quickly.

I: Was the Pendleton Roundup in the same place it is now?

CS: Yes. It's the same place. Happy Canyon [a pageant] used to be up toward town more; now it's by the rodeo

ground. I worked in Happy Canyon once. Ben Jury from Union put that on for several years. There was a write-up in some magazine I was reading about Ben Jury a while back. He furnished stuff for the rodeo, and they'd put on the Happy Canyon show.

I: I've never been to a Happy Canyon. Tell me about it.

CS: It takes the audience back to the early days when the settlers came across in covered wagons. The Indians come, they get in a fight, and the cavalry comes in and run the Indians off. They'd turn the lights off for a few minutes, turn some of the props over, and there's a little store and saloon.

I: So it's a little history?

CS: Yes. I had a big, gray horse that I'd broken when I was a kid; he had never bucked in his life. Part of the show had the cavalry with a covered wagon and a bunch of Indians come through, shooting; Ben wanted to know if I'd let the cavalry ride that horse. I told him, "Yeah, go ahead." He had me help hold a big team of horses. When they did the shooting, he wanted me to help hold them when my gray horse came through. He let out a bawl like a bull and threw that guy clear across that arena.

Old Ben was kind of mad about that. What the hell was I giving him a horse like that for? I said, "Hell, Ben, I broke that horse when I was ten years old!" But he sure bucked that guy.

I: He didn't like the rider or all the commotion?

CS: They were shooting the devil out of one another, and he didn't like it too well.

Learning to Break Horses and Do Ranch Work

I: You said you broke broncs since you were ten years old. How did you do that?

CS: I'd just kept fooling with him, getting on him, and got dumped a few times. My granddad, who always called me Tom, brought a two-year-old colt for us to keep one time. He said, "You can break that horse for me, Tom." I said, "OK." He didn't think I would. So I broke it for him, and he had that horse for a long time after that. He lived out there a little ways of Elgin and rode it back and forth to town.

I: About how long would it take usually to break a horse?

CS: If you keep riding them, it didn't take too long.

I: Did you always ride bareback?

CS: Most of the time, yes.

Duck in chaps bought from a Wild West show
Photo courtesy of Duck Slack

I: When you were a teenager, did you work with horses?

CS: Yes. I rode on our little ranch when I was a kid, and I worked for other guys on ranches after I got big enough. I went over to Heppner and worked quite a bit on ranches.

Hay and Grain Harvesting and other Ranch Work

I: When you were sixteen or so, what did you do on the ranches?

CS: I helped them hay, take care of their stock, and whatnot.

I: Wasn't there a block-and-tackle rigging to put hay up into the loft?

CS: Yes, the derrick. Everything was put up loose, using a Jackson fork that had big, long teeth. I stacked a lot of hay when I was a kid. We had a load of hay on a wagon and jabbed that Jackson fork down in so the derrick could lift it up. A lot of ranchers put hay in the barn by a track at the top of the barn. Those barns had a dog-house stuck out in front, and there was a track from there clear to the back of the barn. When the Jackson fork went up there, it had a piece that they hooked onto a roller, and it would roll down through the barn. The guy in the barn was moving the hay, and he'd holler when he wanted them to trip it He had a rope and he'd give it a jerk to trip it.

They also had what they called a Mormon derrick that put hay in big stacks outside.

I: Wouldn't the wind blow it away or anything when you piled it?

CS: No. We kept tramping it down and moving it around so it all lay pretty flat. Once in a great while the wind would blow a top off one. I had a stack in the lower end of the field one time that I had just put up by hand; a windstorm came and rolled half of it over.

I: But when it's packed down, it stays pretty well?

CS: Yes.

I: How big was a Mormon haystack?

CS: It was a big derrick with a boom clear across the top. It could turn one way or the other. You used a team of horses to pull the load up. Then you could turn it so that you could get on one end of the stack or the other.

I: What was underneath it?

CS: A big set of skids like sled.

I: So you'd pile the hay on top of that sled?

Duck, at age sixteen, demonstrating his ability with horses
Photo courtesy of Duck Slack

CS: No. You'd have your hay on a wagon. Or we used slips, too. On one of the slips we used slings instead of a fork--a big sling that picked the whole thing up. It would take it off the wagon or slip, pull it up on the derrick, and turn it around and onto a stack.

I: Did somebody have to unload the sling with a pitch fork?

CS: You'd give a rope on the sling a jerk, it opened up, and the fork tripped.

I: And the hay fell out?

CS: Yes. The guy up there had to move it around and stack it.

I: When you say *stack it*, I see all this loose hay.

CS: If you just dumped it, you had a big pile of hay. You had to level it out or water would run down through it. If you stacked it right, the water ran off the top. I stacked a lot of it when I was a kid.

I: The Mormon haystacks were left outside?

CS: Yes, we left them out.

I: About how big were they?

CS: There were poles on top that I imagine were thirty feet long or so.

I: How did you gather the hay?

CS: They cut it with a mowing machine and then raked it up. I have one of those old dump rakes here. When I was a kid, they used to bind the grain and make bundles. They had a binder that cut it; then the grain stalks went through it, and the binder would tie a loop around it and kick it out to the side. Then he'd have to go along, pick them up, and stack them, leaving them till they were hauled in.

I: How did they get the wheat off the chaff?

CS: They'd throw the bundles into a threshing machine; as they ran through, it would tear them up and the wheat would come out. It worked like a combine, but it was stationary, run with a steam engine tractor.

I: Did you have to bring the wheat bundles into town to do that, or did they take the threshing machine out?

CS: They took the rig out. They'd stack those bundles in a big stack, and then the rigs would pull in and back into that stack. A couple guys got up on the stack and threw the bundles into it.

I: When the wheat came out, did somebody have to hold a bag?

CS: Yes, for the grain. They had hooks for the sacks and a sack sewer. Usually a guy would be jigging them so they got good and full. Then he'd sew them up. The straw blew out into a big pile.

I: What did they do with the straw?

CS: They turned stock into it and let them eat it. My dad's cousin lost some cattle one time. They ate under the pile, it caved in on them, and they smothered to death.

I: Were there quite a few farmers that had wheat fields?

CS: Yes. All the Grande Ronde Valley, pretty nearly, was wheat fields. All the little guys would raise some wheat anyway.

I: Did they take the grain to a mill?

CS: I had to haul it to Imbler.

I: Was there a flour mill in Imbler?

CS: No, there were flour mills in Elgin and Island City. I hauled the wheat to Imbler, where they shipped it out.

I: I suppose if you had a lot of hay like we did in the Grande Ronde Valley, you couldn't get it all in the barn.

CS: Oh, no. They usually just put enough hay in the barn for their milk cows and stacked all the rest of it outside.

I: Did they stack it pretty near the barn, though?

CS: No, not always.

I: Out in the field?

CS: A lot of it out in the field. They'd feed their stock out there.

I: I've seen paintings of haystacks; they were kind of rounded mounds of hay. Was that what it was like?

CS: Yes. You had to keep them high in the middle; that way the water gets away and doesn't ruin the whole stack. After it got wet and soaked up well, it would turn water away so that the rest of it didn't get wet. It kept pretty well in those stacks. Bale stacks get wet, too; I think they wasted as many of those bales as they did when it was put up loose; water drips down between the bales.

I: What else did you do on ranches?

CS: A little bit of everything: milked cows, plowed, harrowed.

I: How did you plow? Did they have tractors?

CS: No, horses with a riding plow. I've plowed with footburners, they called them.

Dance Halls

I: I heard about a dance hall that was at the Minam. Were you ever there?

CS: Yes, I was there a lot of times. It was a pretty good-sized hall, up over the store. Old Myron Fleser used to own it.

I: Was it just a dance hall?

CS: It was overhead with a store underneath it. It used to get pretty wild. I've been to several of them there.

I: Do you remember any other dances or dance halls around La Grande or Elgin?

CS: At Elgin they used the Grange Hall for dances all the time. Then there was a lodge building up over the Brunswick tavern, I think. They used to have dances in that a lot.

I: Did some of the locals come and play music?

CS: My brother and dad used to play a lot. Dad played the violin and my brother played violin, guitar, piano, and two or three other instruments.

I: Were there special dances or celebrations for the Fourth of July or holidays like that around here?

CS: They'd have little celebrations, and I guess we had dances. They used to have a celebration out there at the old

Pleasant Grove Grange in the Summerville area. They used to have get-togethers and games and play ball.

I: I suppose there was a lot of drinking and whooping and hollering.

CS: Yes. But they usually had some guy being the cop for it; he'd kind of keep it down a little bit.

County Roads

I: Did you ever ride to La Grande on horseback?

CS: One time I rode from La Grande to Elgin in one day. We had come back from the Pendleton Roundup through La Grande and rode to Elgin from there.

I: What was the road like then?

CS: It was a dirt road.

I: Where was the road from La Grande to Pendleton?

CS: It went up near Perry, through Hilgard, and up over the mountain. There's still an old, dirt road up through there, I think. It went around through Kamela and then up through Meacham. The time we went to Pendleton in our Model-T truck, it took us two days going over and two days coming back. The truck didn't have a cab or anything on it. It was just flat with hard rubber tires behind.

I: Where did you stop and spend the night?

CS: The first night we spent at Deadman's Pass. I was only six years old, but I can remember that near Hilgard the fan ran into the radiator and that old Model-T started leaking water badly. Another boy who was with us, Clem McKinnis, was pretty handy with fixing things. He whittled out a bunch of wooden plugs and plugged the radiator as best he could. Mom had a box or sack of regular rolled oats, so they poured a bunch of them into the radiator; that really plugged the holes. We could smell that cooking all the way over the hill.
Any other car than the Model-T would have burned up quickly, but those old Model-Ts just kept going. It didn't matter how hot they got. After we got across, I think they got it fixed in Pendleton.

Dirt roads were all we had. If I remember right, we had to ford the river a time or two.

We came back by Tollgate. There'd been an old road up over there for years. It wasn't much of a road, if I remember right. My dad had worked on the road that goes to Tollgate from Elgin. He was using a team and a scraper on that road, building a right of way. I helped run them; they're hard work. They had a handle on the back that the guy that was helping had

Slack family makes a trip from La Grande to Pendleton in chain-driven Model-T Ford truck --with aid of wooden plugs and rolled oats to stop radiator leaks, 1918
Photo courtesy of Duck Slack

to hold. Once in a while, they'd hit something solid and that handle would flip you right over if you didn't turn it.

I: Did he have to walk behind and hold the handle?

CS: Yes. When they got to wherever they wanted it, he'd flip it up and dump.

I: Did one guy handle the horses?

CS: One guy drove the horses, with a helper.

I: Did they use dynamite on the big rocks?

CS: Yes. They had to.

I: I suppose the roads curved like they used to because they didn't have the equipment.

CS: They just went the easiest way.

Depression Time

I: How old were you during the Depression?

CS: Nineteen or twenty years old. I know people had an awful time making a living. Even after I got a little older, I can remember it was still pretty bad. My dad finally got a job on the railroad section in Elgin. I think he was getting three dollars a day. Of course, that was pretty good money in those days.

Dad worked also in sawmills for quite a little while till things got a lot better. Finally, he went to work in the boiler room at the mill. He'd had a pretty rough time making it, but people didn't seem to mind it so much. They never had had anything to start with. If we had something like that now, it would be terrible. But people weren't used to having a whole lot, and they got along with what they had or could get hold of.

I: I suppose you had a garden.

CS: We always had a big garden and fruit trees; we raised our own spuds and our own beef. We got by all right.

I: Did you hunt?

CS: I never started hunting to amount to anything till I was probably twenty years old. I hunted birds when I was a kid. There used to be an awful lot of little rough grouse. We had a grove of trees back of our barn, and I had a dog that would go out there. When I'd hear him barking, I'd go out there and see he have a bunch of grouse treed. I had a .44 shotgun that I used to knock one or two of them out. I might shoot a few squirrels, but that's about all the hunting I did in those days.

When I was a kid, my dad milked quite a few cows; he ran them out on the range, opening the gate and letting them go. We kids would have to hunt those cows if they didn't come in at night. I walked all over the hills, look-

Slack family (l. to r.): back, Maudie, Clifford, Clifton; front, mother & father
Photo courtesy of Duck Slack

ing for the cows, and I never saw an elk and very few deer. You go up there now and you see them every night.

Marriage & Various Kinds of Work

I: After you grew up, where did you live?

CS: In Elgin. I worked there at the mill before Boise Cascade got it. It used to be called Ponderosa Pine.

I: How different was the logging then?

CS: They had big logs all the time. They didn't monkey with any of the little stuff. When I was young, logging was with horses. They finally started get-ting trucks, but those little Model-As weren't much for trucks; they only pulled three or four logs.

I: After you were married, where did you live?

CS: I had lived up on the side of Pumpkin Ridge, above Elgin. Right after we got married, I moved to La Grande and went to work for old man Tyler. He had a dairy and the Blue Mountain Creamery. He had a couple of ranches, too, and I worked out there for him, but I couldn't get along with the old devil very well.

I: Where was the dairy?

CS: It was on the hillside south of La Grande--about a mile out of town. I lived in back of the present truck stop on Highway 30 [about two miles southeast of La Grande]. There's a big house back in there; it used to be high, but they cut it down. I went to work there in the middle of the summer and quit him in the middle of winter.

I: What did you do for him?

CS: I put up the hay, fed stock in the wintertime, and did building on some of the buildings. He had a lot of milk cows and a big dairy, but I didn't work on that; he had another guy running that.

I: You didn't sound like you put up with him for too long.

CS: That old devil would never have my check ready. He was supposed to pay off once a month. I'd usually make three or four trips in to get my check, and that got kind of tiresome. He'd come out there and tell me to do something and say, "Just do it temporarily." I got fed up with it finally. He got a little peeved at me about something and, behind my back, asked the other guy that was working with me if he would take my place. The guy told me about it. I went in and said, "I want my check." He said, "I haven't got it ready yet." I said, "By God, you better get it ready 'cause I want it all right now." He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "I'm quittin'. I want it all." "You can't quit me." I said, "I can. You just tried to get another guy to take my place, and I know about it. I'm done."

After I quit him in the middle of winter, we moved into Bill Carson's house in Perry.

I: Were you here before they moved the river for the railroad tracks?

CS: No, that was a long time ago. You see, there was a mill over there in that flat [location of present Middle Perry], and they had a pond over there, but the river was still coming this way when that mill was there, so the river was changed a long time ago.

There was a dam in the river when that

mill was there. They took it out. I can remember knowing a mill was there, but I didn't know anything about it. I was in Elgin.

I: When did you buy all the land up on the hillside across the freeway from Perry?

CS: Fifty-some acres up there came with this place. Paulson owned the old Pine Cone down there. It was a motel at that time. That's where those cabins came from right there [pointing to cabins at rear of his house].

I: Where was that?

CS: It was right down there east of where the truck-weighing station is. The highway [I-84] took him out, and he sued them, which didn't do much good. He only got a thousand dollars more than they offered him, and they wouldn't take that hill land. So he sold me that hill land up there for seven hundred dollars--a hundred and sixteen acres, I guess it is.

I: When did you move the house from where it was to where it is now, across from Lower Perry?

CS: That was in '59, I guess. That's when they put the freeway through here. They were getting within sixteen feet of my front door, and I told them I wasn't going to put up with it. They

Pine Cone Auto Camp & Swimming Pool, 1930s
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

Former cabin at Pine Cone Auto Camp, now converted for storage on Slack's property, 2002
Photo by Eugene Smith

Former ticket booth at Pine Cone swimming pool, now converted for child's playhouse on Slack's property, 2002
Photo by Eugene Smith

said they wouldn't move it, but they'd pay to have it moved. So they paid a guy to move it.

I: Before the freeway, did Lower Perry have more houses out this way toward you?

CS: No. I don't think so. They're right up against the railroad and there wasn't anything on this side of the railroad. At one time years ago there was a sawmill right up by the swimming hole. I don't remember it, but a guy that lived up at Hilgard told me about it and showed me some pictures of it.

I: Right above your house here?

CS: Yes.

I: What was the Pine Cone like?

CS: It was one of those places where they had a swimming pool and cabins where people could stay all night. I can remember when the swimming pool was operating.

I: Was there a gas station or a store?

CS: I'm sure they didn't. Next to it was a little farm with a big barn and house; they farmed the land where the weigh station is.

I: Where was the road?

CS: The road was just between there and the railroad track, but it wasn't very wide. This road [previous to I-84] used to go out by the shop, turned, and went over into Robs Hill Road and followed the hill clear around. I lost two or three acres of land here when they put the freeway in.

I: What was on the other side of the railroad tracks, up on the hill, then?

CS: Years ago there was a golf course there. The guy that owned that little place by Pine Cone bought that land and ran a few stock there.

I: How did people get to Pine Cone?

CS: They went right from the main highway; in those days you turned off the highway anywhere.

I: Do you remember about how many cabins there were?

CS: There were six or seven at least. I can't remember just how many. I got two of them and Glen Greenough got one.

I: How'd you get them over to your place?

CS: That was quite a deal. They told us we'd have to tear them down; Glen tore his down and put it back together. But that guy that was building the freeway had a bunch of his equipment. He said, "If you let me use those to store stuff in, I'll move them for you when I get that grade put in. Till that grade's finished, it's mine. I'll just pull them right up there. You put some skids under them." After he told me that, he got to thinking he couldn't get under the bridge over here. He had some great big truck--like a dump truck but they call them payhaulers. So he came up here one day and said, "If you'll come down there and flag for me, I'll bring one of those cabins up here."

He hooked one of his payhaulers on to one of the cabins and started up that road, without giving me time to get up to stop the traffic. He came up the old highway with that thing on skids, and there were cars coming. Man, it's a wonder he didn't wreck somebody! When he pulled around there, those

skids were on fire because he was really going.

Quite a while later he said, "I'll bring that other cabin up, but I'm gonna let you get up there this time." He let me stop traffic while he wheeled that one up here. If the police had caught him, they'd have hung him because he was on the old highway. He wasn't on that new road he built, not thinking about having to come back under the bridge.

Construction Work

I: What work did you do after you quit the dairy?

CS: I got hold of Bechtel Brothers. They were starting up a construction outfit and said they'd give me a job--but not right away. So I drew unemployment insurance until they started up; then I went to work for them. That was before I went to the army.

I: What did you do?

CS: They did their own cement mixing. I'd fill the cement mixer with that factory stuff. When we weren't doing that, they had me carpenter. I never was a carpenter but worked at it.

I: What kind of things did you build?

CS: We built two of the schools in La Grande--one of them the high school and for that school just below the hospital [Central Elementary School] we poured all the cement. We built Lynch's garage. We built the building where Arrow is [on Adams Avenue]. We built a lot of houses on that street that goes to the hospital [Sunset Drive].

Stint with U.S. Army Military Police

I: You said you were in the army.

CS: Yes. I was working for Boise Cascade when I went to the army as an MP [Military Police]. I was at Camp Adair for twenty-six months. That's out at Albany and Corvallis [in western Oregon].

I: Did you have anything to do with rounding up the Japanese-Americans?

CS: No. We had a few there that we took care of, but we didn't have anything to do with rounding them up.

I: You were married then?

CS: Yes, I was, but I wasn't when I got out.

I: How many kids did you have?

CS: Irene and I had a set of twins to start with and lost them after two or three days. I had three step-kids. One of

Duck with his wife at Camp Adair in 1944
Photo courtesy of Duck Slack

them died a few years ago--Donna. And Vicky and Teri. That was all.

Post-war Work

I: What happened when you got out of the army?

CS: I went to work at the mill in Elgin that belonged to Bill Mower. He went out of business and sold it to Boise Cascade. I was working there when they had a strike.

I: Do you remember about when that was?

CS: It was '46 or '47.

I: Did you guys have a union?

CS: Yes. Bill Mower said that, if we struck, he was going to shut it down, and he did.

I: Why did you strike?

CS: We weren't getting enough money. Some guys were getting more and others were doing the same thing.

I: Did the union come in and help you set up the strike?

CS: Yes. When that shut down, I went over to Heppner [in central Oregon] and ran a ranch for my dad's cousin for two years. Then I came back, moved to La Grande, and went to work here.

I: Was that the same mill where your dad worked?

CS: Yes.

I: Do you remember anything about that mill--about how it was run at that time?

CS: They didn't have the high class machinery that mills have now, but they had pretty good machinery. It wasn't really a sawmill; it was a box factory. They took lumber in, planed it, cut into pieces, and made boxes. At one time they made coffin handles and Venetian blinds.

CS: He night-watched there for a while; then he worked in the boiler room.

Early Logging Practices

I: Did your dad ever talk about the logging--how they brought the logs into the mill when he was working there?

CS: I can remember when they brought them in with bobsleds, wagons, and horses.

I: They actually were sleds?

CS: Yes. There was set of runners both in front and behind, just like a wagon with wheels. They'd use them in the wintertime to haul logs in. One winter a couple of loggers stayed at our place north of Summerville and decked a big bunch of logs.

I: How did they get them on the sleds?

CS: They had an A-frame with a cable and pulley on it. They stuck hooks in the end of a log and then attached them to a cable to pick them up.

I: How many logs could they put on a sled?

CS: They were big logs, so they couldn't put very many on.

I: Did they do pretty much the same thing when they started loading trucks with logs?

CS: They had a big A-frame with a block and tackle to pick logs up and set them on the truck. I'd usually have to use a cant hook to turn them over where they wanted them. They unloaded them by using a peavey or a cant hook, which has a long, wooden handle and a hook. The hook goes into the log to turn it.

I: I thought they used those to hook logs in a pond.

CS: There were two kinds. The one called a peavey is the same as a cant hook, but it has a spike in the end for jabbing the logs. That's the only difference.

Years ago they used to float logs down this river and into the mill that was here [in Perry]. I don't remember seeing it, but I've talked to several guys that did. They got on the logs and rode them down the river. And, boy, those big logs will roll!

Dam & Mill at Perry

I: I'd like to know more about Perry.

CS: The dam was right here on the river by the bridge, just the other side of those bluffs. That's where their logs came. I don't know how they got them over to the pond by the mill, straight across from there.

I: Were there kilns near the mill?

CS: Yes. They stacked all the lumber on wheels with stickers so there was air space in between. They'd back the stacks into kilns and turn the heat on for so long to dry the lumber. As far as I know, they're still using kilns. Years ago, all lumber was air dried, but kilns are much faster.

Work at Boise Cascade Mill in La Grande

I: What did you do at the La Grande mill?

CS: I fired eleven big boilers with sawdust; it kept me busy walking up and down the deck, checking those fires all the time.

I: Did the machinery work belts from the steam engine?

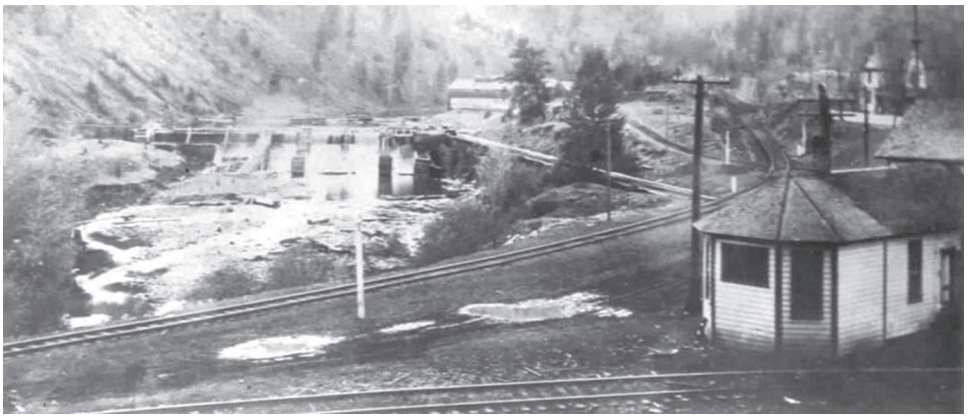
CS: Yes. The mill in La Grande used steam boilers that ran that whole mill and part of the planer. It had a big engine, a belt about three feet wide, and a lot of little belts out in the middle to run the whole works.

I: How did that mill get started?

CS: August Stange built that mill. When he retired, Boise Cascade took it over. I went to work for them at the same time they took it over and stayed for twenty-two years, I guess it was.

I: Did somebody have to shovel the sawdust into the boilers?

CS: Yes, I had a helper that did the shoveling. The last two years I was there, they had steam turbines that made electricity. The guy that was running them retired, and I got his job and ran that for two years. All I had to do then was sit there and listen to those turbines whining. I'd have to get up once an hour and write down the kilowatts. If the mill broke down, I'd have to shut down. Most of the time I just sat there and listened to them whine. That's why I can't hear well today. I didn't have sense enough to wear earplugs, like they do now.



Two views of dam at Perry, 1920s, built in 1900 by George Stoddard to create a holding pond for logs that had floated down the Grande Ronde River and were destined for his sawmill

Photos courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

Two views odf the sawmill at Perry, 1920s
Photos courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

I: They had their own electric power plant?

CS: They made some electric power but never enough to run the whole mill. Most of the time it took all they made and a little more.

I: What kind of machinery put the logs on the belt, into the mill, and got them cut?

CS: They had a chain running down to the pond. The guy who worked on the pond had a long pole with a hook on it; he'd jab the logs and pull them up into the chute.

I: Did they dump all the logs into a pond rather than put them in a mill yard as they do now?

CS: I think they still use that pond. For one thing, the pond washes the logs. In those days, they had two head rigs, or main saws, but they've practically done away with them now. They use them, I guess, to square a log up; after that they run logs through gang saws one time, and they all come out pieces.

Still a Contestant

I: When did you win that buckle [on his belt]?

CS: That was in '91, I guess.

I: What did you do to win it, and how old were you then?

CS: It was for team pinning when I was about eighty. I had started about a year before that and team pinned up until about two years ago. I finally had to quit because I couldn't get on my horse anymore.

I: What is team pinning?

CS: Each group has three members. Thirty head of steers or calves are penned up in the far end of the arena. Down at the lower end, there's a little pen about the size of this room [about sixteen by twenty feet], and that's where they start. The team takes off in a dead run through the arena and gets up to the animals, which are numbered--three with #1, three with #2, and so on.

Just before the team gets to them, someone hollers a number, and the team has to cut out the three steers with that number and put them in a pen-down quicker than anybody else. The team has only got two minutes to do it; if it goes over two minutes, it's out. So it's fast. Sometimes the right steers are hard to find when there are thirty of them. You need a good horse to bring them down in a hurry.

I hated to give it up. I did pretty well at it--nothing big, but I stayed up with the best of them.

I: Have you ever done any other rodeoing?

CS: Years ago, I rode a little bit in little rodeos. I've been at it a little ever since till now.

I: You've always ridden horses, too.

CS: Monkeyed with them ever since I could get on one.

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