

MEL ELDER

August 1, 2005

Interviewed by Micheal Minthorn

Transcribed by Paula Helten (May 14, 2012)

[audio begins]

I: This is an oral history interview with Mel Elder. The date is Monday, August 1st, 2005. Alright, could you tell me your full name?

ME: Melvin Leroy Elder.

I: And when and where were you born?

ME: In Washington County, Kansas.

I: Your birthdate was?

ME: June 29th, 1924.

I: Now did you grow up in Washington, Kansas then? Do you spend your childhood there?

ME: Out in the rural area in—I was born and lived there. Went through grade school and high school and then went into the Navy in World War II.

I: How big is Washington, Kansas? Is Washington an _____? Washington is a city?

ME: Yeah. Yeah, and this was county. Well, the county seat.

I: The county seat. Okay, so um—what's your wife's name?

ME: Edna Mae Elder.

I: And her maiden name was?

ME: Stoffel.

I: Stoffel? And when was she born?

ME: She was born September 2nd, 1927.

I: When did you get—when did you meet her? How did you meet her?

ME: We—they—they moved up in our part of the country, but thirty or forty miles south. And they moved right across the road from us. And this is out in the country, and we went to the same country school together. I'd say, grew up together. She had nine brothers and four sisters.

EE: Three.

ME: You had thirteen. Uh anyway, we went to the same country grade school together, and that's—that's where our acquaintance began.

I: Then, when did you begin dating in earnest?

ME: We already—1943.

I: Were you already out of school then?

ME: I think I—I think I had graduate, but she was still in high school.

I: Uh-huh. Now did you get married to her before you came to Oregon?

ME: Uh, yes. I got discharged in St. Louis, Missouri from the Navy. I went up to—to Kansas, and we got married. Didn't have any means of transportation so we took a bus from Washington, Kansas to Tillamook, Oregon.

I: Uh, that—that doesn't sound like a honeymoon trip.

ME: Well, [chuckles] we tried to make it a honeymoon trip. We stayed overnight or two in Denver and—and—and Salt Lake. We spent a night or two. And she had an uncle, an aunt that lived in Bend, and we went by to see them. And against our wishes, we—we stayed there about three or four days. They had a house-sitting job out at Alfalfa, Oregon which is right out in the middle of the sagebrush.

I: Yeah.

ME: And we—they wanted to know should I go out there with us? And sure, we'll go out there. Well, they didn't say they was gonna be out there about three or four days. Well, we set out there and played solitaire for a lot longer than we wanted to.

I: So, that was just a visit on your way?

ME: Yeah.

I: Did you come to Oregon for a reason then, other than you just got married? Is that what—was there a reason that brought you to Oregon?

ME: Well, my—my parents had moved to Oregon. They had sold out the farm equipment—farm—farming, and they moved to Tillamook where my sister, and my wife's brother lived. He was in the Navy in uh, blimp service at Tillamook. And he were—he was moonlighting at a sign company there at Bay City just out of Tillamook. So, I—I went on leave there, and uh—and his boss—boss told me he would hold a job for me when I got discharged. So, that's—that's kind of the story.

I: How long before you were discharged?

ME: Oh, I think it was about four or five months.

I: And he offered to hold this job—

ME: Yes.

I: all that time while you were—?

ME: Yes, he did.

I: Were jobs in scarce supply at that—?

ME: Well, no they weren't.

I: Oh, okay.

ME: I figured they would be real scarce because all these guys gettin' discharged from the service after the war. And here I had a free college education if I

would have taken it, but I was—I was gettin' pretty old. I was up there about twenty-one years old, and I didn't have time to [chuckles] fool around with college.

I: When you—when—so, when you came out to Tillamook, did you originally intend to stay out here when you first came?

ME: Oh, yes.

I: You did?

ME: Oh yeah, _____.

I: Even though you didn't know what you were gonna do at that time?

ME: Right.

I: Right away, I should say.

ME: Yeah.

I: So, you were actually still technically in the Navy when you first came to Oregon?

ME: Yes, I was, yes.

I: And were you stationed out here?

ME: Uh—

I: Or just visiting at on the _____?

ME: After I came back from overseas, I didn't have enough points to get out of the Navy. And—and they stationed me at the—the receiving station at—oh, out of Seattle.

EE: Bremerton.

I: Bremerton?

ME: Bremerton Navy Yards. And then, they give me an assignment to board a newly built aircraft carrier at Tacoma, so I helped take it on shake-down cruise. And—and then eventually we went down through the Canal and went up to—in Boston Navy Yards, and that's where I left the carrier and went to St. Louis and got discharged.

I: I see. Um, but the bottom line would be that after that, you have been an Oregon resident continuously—

ME: In _____, yes.

I: from that time? Okay. So, let's move ahead then and talk about how you landed in Union County here in La Grande. You were telling me about a—um, a—that you had an opportunity to learn the sign business. You did that in Tillamook before you came here?

ME: Yeah, at Bay City _____.

I: We—we talk about the—the learning sign business when you went back to Tillamook. Who taught you that,—

ME: Okay.

I: and—and—?

ME: The owner of the—the sign company was an excellent neon tube bender. _____ going to business, and I have _____. That was his profession, and he taught me the—the neon tubing processing.

I: What was his name?

ME: Bill Sherman.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: W. K. Sherman.

I: Now was there a—did you have to have a license or certification in order to do this kind of sign work?

ME: I was on an apprenticeship state—a state apprenticeship. And after serving my apprenticeship of three years, I um—I got a journeyman card. And uh, [chuckles] at that time, he started a neon tube bending school in Portland for Veterans, and he left me in charge. He more or less lost interest in the sign company and that place I couldn't charge anything. The materials wouldn't pay the bills, and finally my paycheck started bouncing, and so I quit and—and went to work for the Tillamook County Greenway Association on a route selling dairy products. And previously, when I was working for Mr. Sherman, we had a—we'd built a pretty good size neon sign. And we didn't have too much knowhow on to hang a good size sign like that so uh, electrical products company in Portland sent one of their men down to help us. And I got acquainted with him, and at a later day when I was working for the Greenway, he—he had the—came to Pendleton and bought the sign company there. And then he heard about the one in La Grande being for sale, so he called me and told me about it. He said I ought to get on that, which I did.

I: What was his name?

ME: Uh, Miltenberger. Julie—Jules Miltenberger.

I: And he's, uh—he's the, uh—I think he's now deceased, right?

ME: Yeah.

I: The owner of what has evolved into a company over there called Sign Man.

ME: Yeah, I—I think it was Eastern Oregon Neon—

I: 'Cause his son—

ME: at one time.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: Yeah.

I: Yeah. So, he—first of all, let's go back. You got your journeyman's card, and what was the trade called?

ME: Neon sign man. Neon—neon sign man.

I: And there was a—then there was an apprenticeship or trade—

ME: Oh, yeah.

I: that resulted in a license or certification for that.

ME: Yeah.

I: You don't just walk in and do it?

ME: No, that's true. However, when it comes into the licensing, it—that's more or less to do with the electrical part. So, we always had to carry electrical contractor's licenses

I: To work around electricity?

ME: Yeah.

I: Okay, so Mr. Miltenberger told you about this sign company that was for sale over here in La Grande. What was it called?

ME: Uh, Grande Ronde Neon.

I: And um, I know there's quite a story about that getting started in that business over here. You told me in our initial meeting that that was about 1949.

ME: Yes.

I: That you bought that company? How did that work out? What—what happened with that?

ME: Well, it was—it was a real struggle. We—we bought out a fellow. Owen Chancellor was his name. He was—he had been the superintendent of the Grande Ronde Hospital, and may have taken the sign company in on a bill. So, he—he took over the sign company and _____ at the hospital. And not knowing anything about signs, he didn't—[chuckles] he didn't make a go of it. So he was wantin' to get rid of it, and had we known, we could have started our own just as well. But it was a real struggle getting—getting going, probably four or five years. And it so happened that I bought a—a fellow that I'd worked with over on the coast to go in partnerships with. And I—I didn't really know him

that well. He was a sign painter, and that's—and I was not a sign painter. And so I needed—needed his services, and turned out that to make a long story short, he was an alcoholic un—unbeknownst to me. And—and Keith Rowe, who was—

I: What was his name?

ME: Uh, J. W. Weiser. He was known as Bud Weiser.

I: Bud Weiser.

ME: I think he did justice to the name.

I: Did he? Now, were there other sign companies in the area when you came? Was there another sign company in—?

ME: Yeah, there was a—a sign paintings company. Worley Sign Company.

I: What happened with them?

ME: As time went on, we—we built our business, his businesses completely disappeared practically. He eventually left town.

I: Because they weren't as motivated or skilled or—or experienced—

ME: Oh—

I: or what?

ME: I think quality of serve—quality of work had a lot to do with it. And we—it got pretty competitive there for a while, and we happened to be the winners.

I: You talked about there were—that there were two mistakes made in this business when you came over. That—one of them being that maybe you should have started from scratch.

ME: Right.

I: And the other one was that your partner choice might have been a mistake.

ME: Yes.

I: Is that what caused you to struggle for so long in the beginning?

ME: That had something to do with it because it was a matter of working almost seven days a week and long hours to develop enough income to make a living for both families and keep the business going.

I: How did you come to the decision that—that you needed to unload your partner?

ME: Well, it was just—

I: Or—?

ME: a matter of fact that he didn't ever come to work anymore. He quit comin' to work.

I: Uh-huh. You talked about going to Kansas on a vacation.

ME: Yeah. My wife's family had thirteen children and had never been together all at one time, and they decided to have a reunion. And that was in '50—1950. And so, we's made up our mind we were gonna go to it regardless of what happened. And I knew when we came back that there was gonna have to be a change. And it just so happened when we returned that Keith Rowe who was a native of La Grande had been—he and his wife had been back in Kansas City, and he was learning the sign business back there. He was already a very good artist, and he was also going to art school there. Well, he had finished his apprenticeship and came back to La Grande and that Bud Weiser while I was gone—so when we got home, I met Keith. I said, "Well Keith, how would you like to go into business with Bud Weiser?" And he said, "That's the last thing I would ever do." So I said, "How 'bout you and I?" And he lit up, and he says, "You bet." So, we—we dug up enough money, five hundred dollars and paid him off just enough to get him out of town. We almost had to throw him out.

I: Huh.

ME: But he had no investment in the business what—whatsoever, and so anything he got was a plus.

I: So the buyout was pretty easy?

ME: Yes, uh-huh. He—

I: So did he actually have to sign off on that?

ME: I don't think we ever signed anything.

I: So now, how long did you stay in business with Keith Rowe?

ME: I think it was seven years.

I: Yeah. Was that a good relationship?

ME: Pardon?

I: Was that a good relationship?

ME: Basically, yes. It was—it was good and bad. On that worst part, that was—was that production didn't go on all the time. When—when I had to go out and meet a customer and sign the job, Keith always wanted to go along, and things like that, the production just came to a standstill. And, in looking back, I know we—we probably goofed off quite a bit. We both liked to fish and hunt and everything. But anyway, as time went on, he became unhappy for the fact that we probably weren't—we weren't gettin' ahead very much. And I was feelin' the same way. And he—he decided he wanted to go to Pendleton and set up a sign—set up a shop over there, so I bought him out. Then I hired—I hired a sign painter.

I: So then you just assumed his role at the company without a partner?

ME: Yes.

I: Uh-huh. Then—so, at that time then when you were working together, what was it that you were out hustling for business and doing the—the business aspect, and he was doing production?

ME: Yeah, we both did production of course.

I: Was that kind of just—?

ME: But—

I: Was that sort of your _____?

ME: _____-- somebody had to do the legwork. And—and when he—when he came here, he had—he'd never had any experience of whatsoever. He didn't even know how to write a check. So, I took down on myself to do that part of it, and I think—I think there ended up to be a bit of jealousy there that caused him to be unhappy and wanted to go out on his own.

I: So then you stayed independent then? After he left the business, you owned it yourself?

ME: Yes.

I: How long did you own that business? When did you retire? Maybe that might be easier.

ME: Well, we were in business thirty-five years.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: So, seven at thirty-five would be—and then we—

I: Well, thirty-five at one hundred forty-nine—

ME: Twenty-eight years.

I: would be like '84—1984?

ME: Uh, yeah, I was—I retired when I was sixty, and I'm eighty-one now. It was twenty-one years ago.

I: Okay. Who'd you sell the business to?

ME: A couple of the guys that had been working for me for a considerable time I'd moved through the apprenticeship. Ralph Moore was a senior age-wise and his son-in-law at the time, Matt Barber. They—they took it on in a—a partnership basis.

I: And they own that business now?

ME: Ralph has since retired, and Matt has it by himself.

I: Now that's currently called the Grande Ronde Sign Company?

ME: Yes.

I: And where is it located now?

ME: It's out on Cove Avenue. I don't know the exact address, but—

I: Was it—were—is that where it was when you retired?

ME: No.

I: Where did you—?

ME: It was on Cove Avenue, but it was near the underpass.

I: So, it's—?

ME: Just south of the underpass.

I: I see. Where were you first located when you came to town?

ME: Uh, right down on Adam—or Depot Street. It was a—

EE: It's a parking lot now.

ME: Pardon?

EE: It's a parking lot.

I: Yeah, down there—

ME: It's—

I: well, that's a—

ME: it's now—

I: I'd say Depot and Jefferson in there by the railroad?

ME: Yeah, it's now Red Cross parking lot there.

I: Yeah, yeah.

ME: We had a building there. It didn't even have a truck door, just a walk-in door and—

I: So, that wasn't a parking lot at that time? There was—

ME: Oh, no.

I: a building there.

ME: Oh no, there was three—three buildings. It was a barber shop next to the alley and then us and then a restaurant in the corner.

I: Remember the name of the restaurant?

ME: Uh, Corner Lunch. Well—yeah, Corner Lunch, yeah.

I: And it uh—it burned down?

ME: Yeah, that whole half block burned down.

I: Is that what caused you to move? Had you moved already?

ME: No, we'd already moved down on Adams Avenue. I believe it was 1515 Adams.

EE: _____.

ME: Yeah, next to that Chevron Station that's there now across from the Globe Furniture.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: And I'm not sure for how many years we stayed there. It was a big, wooden, construction building, and O.K. Rubber Welders was in the front and we were in the rear. We had half of it.

I: Did you rent that building or buy it?

ME: We rented it.

I: So let's talk about who your customers were. Who were some of your customers? You've already told me a couple of interesting stories about that.

ME: Well, I think the first neon sign that I did was for D & B Donut shop.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: Which is now a—oh, um, Sugar and—

I: Joe and Sugar's—

ME: Joe and Sugar, yeah.

I: Coffee Company or—?

ME: Yes.

I: And what kind of a sign was it?

ME: It was a neon window sign, probably a good size, had multiple colors. And interesting enough, the owners, Dick Hartsock and Bud Bennett, they'd just moved out from Nebraska. And Bud Bennett was the owner, and he was kind of a—a—I'd say a son of theirs. They—they had watched out for him. They've been—they'd been in the bakery business back there so they came out here and started this doughnut shop.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: And it went on for many years, and then Dick Hartsock became the county assessor, and Bud Bennett took over the dying doughnut shop by himself then eventually sold it.

I: I see. So, you made that sign for them. Who else did you make signs for?

ME: Oh gosh, we did work for just about every sign or every business in town. Uh, early on, I—I don't know. One of the major signs we did was for Royal Café. And it was located right across from the new building that's on Adams. This being at—what do they call that new building on Adams?

I: The ODS building.

ME: No, the one on Adams Avenue.

I: Oh, on Adam.

EE: N. K. West.

ME: N. K. West—

I: N. K. West.

ME: _____ Vanderbilt. It was right across the street from there. And we built a marquee type sign, had flashing light bulbs on it. And it was pretty—uh, pretty attractive for that day and age. Then there was a vertical sign went with it. Then eventually they moved down to the Foley building where—golly, it won't be in there now. Where that—where the restaurant was that moved—well anyways, across from that city building. So, we got—we moved all that sign, installed it on the front there. Luckily, it fit real well.

I: Yeah.

ME: And Trotter's, we did sign work for Trotter's. That was a men's store. _____ since been closed down. They had bell hats for men and suits, really beautiful stuff, shoe shop, all devoted to men. And it was kind of a meeting place for businessmen. I remember on their counter, they had a big cigar lighter. And it was brass, stood up there about six or eight inches high. And then the businessmen, I—I think the majority of businessmen in town hit there once a day either in the morning or afternoon.

I: To—to talk about business, or to smoke cigars?

ME: Oh, just to smoke cigars and talk.

I: Anything.

ME: Yeah.

I: Did you do that?

ME: No, I was too busy. [chuckles].

I: Uh-huh.

ME: I did do some—I remember one thing I did. They had a big cabinet there with bell hats and it needed some lights, so I—I built neon lighting in behind all the hats there so it would highlight ‘em.

I: Uh-huh. Did that work?

ME: Oh, it worked real well, yeah.

I: Were people happy with the signs that you made for them?

ME: I don’t really recall, and very, very few times ever having any—anybody that wasn’t happy with the work we did. Usually, I think one of the main problems we had is that we didn’t have any competition in that kind of business. So they had no way of knowing prices, but I can honestly say that I was probably a third less than I should have been on all our pricing. Because we liked the town, we wanted to like be raising our kids here and college and everything, and—and I wanted to be friends with everybody. [chuckles]. So, really we didn’t—we didn’t charge near what we should have, but on the other hand, they didn’t know whether that was a good price or not. And once in a while you’d find somebody that thought we robbed ‘em—

I: Huh.

ME: when in fact we were doin’ a lot best _____.

I: Were—were you aware of what the prices were for various items, say over in Pendleton—

ME: Oh, yeah.

I: and other areas?

ME: Oh, yeah.

I: You knew these people?

ME: Uh, golly, if a—if a Portland company came in here and bid on that sign at—that was—I knew I'd get the job because they were way higher than what I got.

I: Now, that brings up the question then. When you were dealing in these signs, was it through bidding, or would they just call you up and say, "I need a sign."

ME: Both.

I: How did the bidding process work?

ME: We had—we had customers that we worked for for years. Since—for instance, Boise Cascade. They've got a place they never would even ask us a price. They'd just say, "Do it." But then of course, there was others that we had to submit a sketch, usually a colored sketch of some type, especially with electrical—electric sign.

I: Would that be a full color sketch or—?

ME: Well yeah, to show—

I: To show what the colors—

ME: Yeah.

I: would be?

ME: Yeah. Mm-hm.

I: Mm-hm. How would bidding work?

ME: Bidding?

I: If you had to bid with others, how would that work?

ME: Well, we would present our sketch and the price on it, and they would present their—their sketch and do the price.

I: Was that done in private, or was it a group affair? Would know what—

ME: Oh, no, no—

I: the other one bid?

ME: It was just you'd go—you'd go and meet with the customer individually, and then you'd take what happened—whatever happened.

I: And so you'd say if—if an out-of-towner came to bid on a sign, you could usually get it simply because your prices were lower?

ME: Yeah, and when I—I cultivated a good clientele. I mean they—they'd back me a hundred percent, the majority of them. I—I don't—like I say, I don't think I had very many enemies. And they've got the place that we hardly ever see anybody come in and bid against me.

I: So tell us, I guess briefly or in a nutshell, how do you make a neon sign anyway?

ME: Well—

I: I've always wondered about that myself.

ME: In a shop that does electrical signs, there's about five different trades, I believe it is. Sign painter—and big shops would be sign painter plus designers. Well, we combined that. And sheet metal men, electricians, and sign electricians, sign installers and servicemen. In big shops those were all—they were _____ all five different trades.

I: And so—?

ME: We combined it into maybe three—two or three people.

I: 'Cause you were a smaller operation—

ME: Yeah.

I: that way you just did it. So, how do you—how do you—how does a neon sign get made?

ME: How do you what?

I: How do you—how do you make a neon sign?

ME: Well, you start out of course with the—the sketch, the design and all that. And then the sign painter, he'll—he'll make up—
[audio clicks – no delay]

I: We're continuing the interview with Mel Elder, August 1st, 2005. So, we're talking about how we get our idea into production. So we've got a full-scale drawing.

ME: Yeah. A layout and then the sheet metal work starts and usually there's quite a bit of angle iron built into it. Then on the installation type—

I: What is—what is angle iron?

ME: It'd be bars of ang—

I: Oh.

ME: of iron that you reinforce, you know. If there's a projecting sign, then you have to have built up legs projecting out where you can attach to the building.

I: Okay.

ME: You have to make it structurally sound.

I: Yeah.

ME: And as time went on, we—we were forced to have Underwriter's Laboratories inspect our signs so that they were up to—

I: _____?

ME: code. And then of course, it was a neon sign, the neon tube bender got busy and—and formed the letters.

I: How does that work? How do you do that?

ME: Well, you buy—we bought our neon tubing in four foot lengths, and you can get ‘em in different sizes, like ten millimeter, twelve, six, fourteen, eighteen on eight. Well, eight millimeters is a—is a popular size. But anyway, you buy the tubing with coating in it according to what color you’re gonna use, like as in a, if you wanted green, you had a—they had a fluorescent coating inside, and when it was completed it would light up green. If you put argon gas in it, if you put neon gas in it, it would light up gold. So you’ve got different color combinations.

I: So, it could be its basic color, or it could turn another one just depending on which gas you put in?

ME: Yes. In that tube color is a gas.

I: Now would you—maybe I’m going too fast, but do you bend or form these before you put the gas in it?

ME: Oh, yeah. Yeah, you form them and—

I: How do you do that?

ME: Uh—

I: How do you get ‘em into—?

ME: That’s set across fires and you hold it, and you mark the spot where you want to make a bend whether it’s a right angle bend or a U-bend. And you’d put that portion of glass in the fire and get it heated to a melting point, make your bend, and then all the time you’ve got a—a hose with you, keep it in your mouth. It’s a blow hose with a torque on end—in one end of the tube and this hose you plugged into the other end. We’d made that bend, and then blow it out to the original size because once you heated it, well, it collapsed.

I: So that’s how you kept the inner space open then?

ME: Yes.

I: Uh-huh. There was no gas in it at that time?

ME: No, just air.

I: Okay, so—

ME: So, on each end of the—you've got the letter formed—poly letter formed, you weld 'em together usually in sections of maybe, oh, two-foot long. And each end of the section would have an electrode on it, and in the middle somewhere, we'd have a tubulation which was the only outlet. It was just a little, fine, tube. We'd weld it in—blow a hole in the neon tubing and weld this tubulation glass on. And then when you got all that done, you'd put it on a vacuum pump—weld that little tube to the manifold of the vacuum pump and draw air out of it. And then you have a—a high-voltage transformer that leads to one end of the tube and the other end. When you get it up to a certain vacuum, you turn the high-voltage on, and you'd light up the whole tube. The air in there just impurities and just draw out a little bit of air at a time. All the time this is going on its heating, and it'd get real hot. You'd lay a piece of white paper on there, and when it charred it, then you'd shut the voltage off. And let it keep pumpin', and it'd pump out all the impurities, so it would be sterile inside the tube when you got through. And then eventually, it'd be—the vacuum pump would draw it up to a solid vacuum, and then you shut it off. The vacuum pump would let in a certain amount of gas, a small amount of gas, either neon or argon gas. And when you got that in there—'cause argon gas which was blue. You had a mercury track on the—on the manifold of the pump. And we'd melt it off—melt the tubulation off through the pump, and then we'd dump that mercury in the tube. And shake the mercury to each end of the—on the electrodes, and that's what caused the brilliance on those fluorescent colors was the blue gas.

I: With the mercury inside?

ME: Yeah, the mercury would vaporize and—and it caused the _____ brilliancy. Most fluorescent—I mean now fluorescent lights, you know, your light fixtures? Each end of that's got mercury on. That's how they get the brilliance. And anyway, once you get up to a vacuum and let the gas in, dump mer—dump mercury in and then let the gas in whichever. And you seal it off right at the tube, and it's ready to operate. And then we'd—which is a cross overs and join the letters, and we'd have to block that out so it's pretty good. But the _____ ready to use. You—you have a hole in the sign in the metal part with electrodes—where the electrodes jacked in to make the contact in there. The spring housing and the transformers hooked up inside. Depending on the size of the sign, you may have one transformer or you may have half a dozen or more—

or even more than that. And they operate on high-voltage, low amperage. That's about it. And of course you have to—this metal part in the meantime, the sign _____. He'd been paintin' it and lettering and all. And uh—

I: And the metal guy's been gettin' the—the support structure ready?

ME: Yeah, they've had it all ready.

I: You—

ME: So then the sign electrician, he gets in there and wires all the transformers up to the electrodes' housings. Then you load it on a truck and hope you don't have an accident.

I: Did that ever happen?

ME: Oh yeah, it happened.

I: And what happens if those things break?

ME: You make a U-turn and head back to the shop. [chuckles]. Redo whatever happened in the—

I: How 'bout working with these chemicals, argon and—and mercury? Are—first of all, are these signs made the same way today then?

ME: Basically, yeah.

I: Uh-huh. Are there more restrictions about working with those? Mercury can be quite dangerous to work with.

ME: Uh, I don't—uh, course I've been away from it for twenty-one years now, but I don't know of any—any restrictions. Uh, we always—

I: Did you work with it in your hands?

ME: we always did treat it with care. Mercury is not _____ a _____.

I: Did you—did it get on your hands? Did you wear gloves? What—did you—?

ME: Oh no, you didn't wear any gloves. And no, we—we didn't make contact with it and rule it. Uh, use an eyedropper to put the mercury in the track that we used.

I: Oh, okay.

ME: And no, we really as a rule didn't—didn't make contact with it 'cause we—we—we realized it was a dangerous.

I: Now what about argon 'cause that's a gas. Is there a danger working around that?

ME: No, I don't—I don't know of any danger as far as argon or neon. Uh, they're both atmospheric gases. You're breathing a certain amount of argon every time you breathe.

I: Yeah, yeah. Um, that's very interesting. Um—

EE: Actually, the asbestos—

ME: Oh, yeah.

I: Did you work around asbestos?

ME: Well, yeah. Our—our neon patterns that we bent our tubing—we had to make sure that our asbestos pattern—we bent all our—our tubing backwards. And when you picked it up and turned it around, it's—it's the way it's supposed to be. And yeah, I worked with asbestos for years. And—and we've chance that's one of the reasons I've got a husky voice because of a cancer I had in my vocal chord. I think I told you that.

I: You didn't work with masks or respirators around the asbestos?

ME: No.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: No, just because—

I: Do you know if they do now if they have to—

ME: Uh, they have—

I: work around—

ME: done away—

I: asbestos?

ME: with the asbestos. They came up with a different—

I: Oh.

ME: material. Uh, which—which is not as—not as good as the asbestos, but it does make—

I: Were you u—were you using this new material before you retired?

ME: Yeah.

I: Okay.

ME: Yeah, it just—just had started doing that.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: Yeah, they'd—they'd just takin' asbestos off of the market.

I: How about, uh, would you like to tell us this story about doing some sign work for the Luck's Rooms?

ME: [laughs].

I: We'd be very interested to hear.

ME: Yeah, uh, this was—this was early on when we were still located down on Depot Street. Just in the same block, there was a house of ill repute set up in this upstairs above a—what now is the Longhorn—

EE: Branch.

ME: Longbranch Café.

I: By a house of ill repute, would we be talking about prostitution?

ME: Prostitution, yes. Well, the Madame that owned the house came to see us about a sign, and they wanted us to letter the door right there on the ground level, “Luck’s Rooms.” Well, anybody that’s familiar with that name who’d knew what he was talking about. So—

I: So, meaning it wasn’t really a hotel?

ME: Yeah, right. [chuckles].

I: Okay, okay.

ME: Uh, Bud Weiser, he did the sign painting, and so he lettered—he lettered the door. She said, “Well, when you get through come up and get paid.” And so when he got through, he says, “Now, I—I don’t want to go up there with myself.”

EE: [chuckles].

ME: So, we—we took a bill up there, hand it to her. She said, “Now, do you want cash, or do you want to take it out in trade?” Well, we elected to take cash.

I: I see.

ME: And uh, I—I know that, uh, from all hearsay, that they ran—they ran a good business. They didn’t—they weren’t a—a real flophouse. The girls she had workin’, they’d be out on the main street. They’d go in and buy the best clothes. They really dressed first class. And the Madame, she was the same way. And the city—city had an understanding with ‘em. You run a good business, and we won’t bother you. I don’t know. I suppose it might have been some kind of payoff. But I don’t know how many years they lasted.

I: Would this have been, uh, one of your—was this one of your first signs, did you say, or just an early episode?

ME: It was early on, yeah.

I: Would have been '49 or into the early '50's then?

ME: I'd say, yeah around early '50's.

I: Were you aware of any other businesses like this that were around town?

ME: Uh, there had been one over on—on—was the street that went to the Sacajawea across the tracks. Is that Spruce?

I: Yeah.

ME: Uh, there used to be one upstairs on Spruce above the tavern that I—as—as I recollect, they had—they'd gone out of business about the time we came to town. Then it—

I: And this was just common knowledge? People knew these—these places and businesses were around?

ME: Boy, they'd—

I: Whether they frequented them or not, which of course—

ME: I think the majority of people realized that they were in business.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: Course the—the downtown businesses, they knew.

I: And of course, they had a great sign on their door—

ME: Yeah. [chuckles].

I: that—that came from your business.

ME: Yeah.

I: Uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh. Um, did she pay cash for that sign?

ME: Yes, she did.

I: Okay.

ME: [chuckles].

I: I need to—about twelve bucks? Well, that—that might have been pretty spendy then.

ME: Well yeah, that's—

I: Uh-huh.

ME: It was quite a bit of money in those days.

I: It might have been more than what it cost to—to, um, go upstairs.

ME: Yeah.

I: Let's see, um, now in addition to making signs, you said there were a couple other aspects to your business also. Uh, first of all, did you train or apprentice other people into the sign business while you owned your business?

ME: Yeah, I uh—I think over the years, I—probably put, oh, about five fellows in through apprenticeship, either sign electrician or sign painting.

I: Now, um, I'm not all that familiar with trade—with—with the trades, but so would you hire these people on, and they would work for you for a certain length of time in order to get their experience that they needed to get their license or—

ME: Yeah, right.

I: card or whatever?

ME: And so, as a matter of fact, the—later on we hired people from the same family; Rob Moore and his sons. I forget now. Let's see, there was Steve. Let's see, Dave. I think that's the only ones of them. Then others of Barb—Matt Barber's family that had it—several of them. So we kind of—it was kind of a family affair there. And finally, I got to thinking, well, you know I'm gonna want to get out of this sometime so we incorporated and sold or practically gave the

boys a share. So, when—when we got out of business it was a matter of selling our shares.

I: I see.

ME: Just I had to be going into _____, and so they bought my shares.

I: And that's how the business was transferred?

ME: Right, right.

I: Kept you from having to put a For Sale sign out and—?

ME: Absolutely, yeah.

I: I see.

ME: Yeah.

I: So now—

ME: It worked out good.

I: when—when your apprentice is working for you, did they work for the same rate of pay they would get if they had a card, or did they typically work for less while—

ME: Well, they—

I: they were apprenticing?

ME: they start out less, yes.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: And the apprenticeship council kept check—kept track of us, making sure that everything was going the way it should be.

I: Did you have to complete paperwork or evaluate them—

ME: Oh yeah, there was—

I: in some way?

ME: Yeah.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: Yeah.

I: What sort of evaluation skills, or what—

ME: Well, you had to—

I: sort of things did you need?

ME: you had to upgrade ‘em or downgrade ‘em, whichever the case may be. In our case, it was upgrading after let’s say, every six months, something like that. I don’t remember the exact time, but every so often you had to fill out and upgrade ‘em.

I: And what is upgrading?

ME: Well, to show that they have been there so long, and that they are capable of doing their job, and getting to be more capable.

I: So for example it’s just basically sort of letting them know what more they could do than the last time?

ME: Right, yeah.

I: Now they know how to do this and this and this?

ME: Yeah.

I: And they’re competent now at this and this and this—

ME: Yeah.

I: and that kind of—? Then did you keep these people on when they finished their apprenticeship?

ME: Yeah. Uh, [chuckles] course this depended on the individual. One of the first fellows that I put through apprenticeship was Dave Larson, and I think he worked for me for about, oh, five—five or six years. And he approached me one day, and he says, “Uh, I wonder if—if I was to get a leave of absence for—” three months or whatever it was. He says, “I’d like to go to Oklahoma to the horseshoeing school.” I know I said, “If—you know if you have your mind made up you want to do that,” I said, “I—yeah, that’d be fine. I’ll try and get along without you and when you come back, we go to work.” Boy, he came back. He said, “Well,” he said, “I want to go to horseshoeing, oh, full time.” Which he has been ever since he’s back he just always—well, he’s retired now. But uh, I—I’d uh—I had his journeyman. I had him get his journeyman card, so he was there long enough to do that. But uh, that was the last of his sign work.

I: So, ordinarily you tried to hang onto the people, so you—

ME: Yes.

I: you would maybe get—you wanted to be comfortable with them be—anyway?

ME: Yeah.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: Steve Moore which is Ralph’s oldest son, he was the—he was the best apprenticeship I ever had. And I taught him the neon tube bending, and he learned to sheet metal work, and the installations. He—he knew the whole thing. He wasn’t a sign painter, but other than that, he—he can do anything. And—and uh, eventually he went to work for Art Rasmussen’s Signs out of Salt Lake. They had a—a shop in Sacramento, and I don’t know. They had a whole bunch of ‘em. I think he had one in Boise and—big outfit. And he became the—their top neon tube bender. He’s very good. He got better than I ever was. And eventually he came back and worked for the boys that bought us out. His dad, his brother-in-law and worked for them for several years, I think it was. And then he decided to go out on his own, so he’s up at Coeur d’Alene, Idaho in signing business up there. And he—he’s still does Matt Barber neon—neon tube bending. So, it’s—

I: From up there?

ME: Yeah, he's in back down.

I: Huh.

ME: He was excellent.

I: So we talked about you—you were the—is there a particular title that you have when you lead other apprentices? Are you called a trainer or a—

ME: No, uh—

I: teacher in _____?

ME: in order to meet state qualifications we had to be journeyman.

I: So, that would have been the title?

ME: Yeah.

I: So you were a journeyman, and that qualified you to lead or teach others that in trade?

ME: Journeyman sign electrician.

I: Yeah, okay. Then, you said also that another part of your business was sign servicing of the electrical signs?

ME: Oh, yeah.

I: You would—what did that entail, and—?

ME: Well, of course it'd depend a lot on the size of the sign they'd have. We had signs—there were places that maybe you'd run the crane up there, and you'd crawl up and get right inside the sign and maybe spend a couple hours in there solving the problems and rectifying 'em. And others are little stick-out signs that we could work off the ladder or whatever. And repair a shortage—maybe a short on the sign, or a burned out transformer, or broken neon tubing. In the

case were for plastic signs, it was usually your fluorescent lamps need replacing, or replace the transformer _____.

I: Was there any need to clean these signs, or did they have different—

ME: Oh, yeah—

I: people do that?

ME: we do that—did a considerable amount of that. A matter of fact we had a—a _____ pump—high pressure pump right on the service rig with a long hose we could take up on a ladder and wash the inside of his—those plastic signs.

I: I see. You were telling me based on this photograph about the Bohnenkamp sign. Wasn't it—is that—this appears to be a ladder that's next to the sign.

ME: Yes.

I: Did you build that ladder with—

ME: No—

I: the sign?

ME: we didn't build that sign. We, uh—we serviced it.

I: I see.

ME: It was there when I came to town.

I: So you were telling me about one of your staff was up there cleaning that sign. Tell us about that.

ME: Yeah, we were repainting the sign. I was down on the ground, and he was clear up near the top of the sign repainting and had a little can of paint there he was workin' out of. And all of a sudden it slipped, came down, hit the edge of the marquee. There was a marquee right down below, and flipped right over on a car. [chuckles].

I: [chuckles].

ME: So, we had a—we had a real job of cleaning up paint. [chuckles].

I: Was that oil based paint then?

ME: Oh, yeah.

I: So that wouldn't have been easy to clean up.

ME: No, it—we got right on it and wiped—wiped a lot of it off while it was still wet. And then—then we had to take mineral spirits to finish wiping it down.

I: Did that do anything to the paint of the car it fell—?

ME: No, it didn't seem to affect it any.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: I think one time we did that, and we just turned it over to insurance and let them take care of it.

I: Oh? Uh-huh.

ME: But that was—

I: You were insured for an event like that—

ME: Oh, yeah.

I: to be _____?

ME: Very.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: You almost had to be.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: Yeah.

I: Then you told me one of your customers was a—one of—yeah. One—one of your—either one of your customers, or we just talked about it as a business that isn't there anymore and that's this Idaho Owned or K.O.B.

ME: Oh yeah, Falk's, ID store. You know it's in one of those photographs that you can see their sign.

I: Oh yeah, here it is.

ME: Yeah.

I: Next to a Fountain Drug and a—

ME: Yeah.

I: bank on the other, so just before—

ME: _____--

I: Laurence's Jewelry there.

ME: Yeah.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: And they were Idaho owned. I think there's only about three—maybe three Falk's ID at that time.

I: Now was—

ME: There was several, but—

I: was that part of their name, "Idaho owned"—

ME: No.

I: 'cause it says, "ID Store." So—

ME: Well, it's the ID store.

I: That talked about Idaho?

ME: I think, yeah.

I: So that being the same—

ME: I think that stood for Idaho Department Store.

I: Oh? So, were these things like products that originated out of Idaho?

ME: Oh, not particularly. No, they were just like any other dry goods store.

I: That was a department?

ME: Yeah, they had the complete wardrobe, men and women, children, and it was just a really a nice workin' man's store.

I: Um, did you do this sign or the sign work for them?

ME: No, that's—that's an older—it was there when we came. I'd sure worked on it a number of times though.

I: So you serviced their signs?

ME: Oh, yeah.

I: Uh-huh. And so they were one of your customers for this servicing—

ME: Yeah.

I: the signs business?

ME: Yeah.

I: Okay, well you know on these postcards that we're lookin' at, there's a ton of signs on Adams right here just on this uh, five-block stretch.

ME: Yeah, the town _____ there—

I: That doesn't even cover the rest of La Grande!

ME: Yeah. [chuckles].

I: So—

ME: Do you see the Sacajawea—

I: Uh-huh.

ME: sign? Course that hotel's all gone, and the end block just beyond it that burned—about a half a block burned up at one time. As a matter of fact I had the sign aerial truck down there helpin' fight the fire. Uh, there was a—called a Noodle Parlor—was a Chinese place, oil shop, photographer, and I guess maybe one or two other businesses burned out. It started at night.

I: Is that—is that what caused the demise of the Sacajawea Hotel was this fire?

ME: No, had nothin' to do with it.

I: Okay.

ME: No, it wasn't in the same block even.

I: Oh, I see.

ME: No, uh, the U.S. National Bank decided they wanted a bank there, and so they bought—bought the building and had it demolished. That's the saddest thing that ever happened to La Grande.

I: You're not the first person that I heard say that.

ME: Yeah. See right now today with a building like that they would have—somebody came along and—and converted it to apartments.

I: Or even had a nice, downtown, hotel _____?

ME: Yeah, a downtown hotel there.

I: There is no hotel on—there's no hotel, period—

ME: No.

I: here. They're all motels.

ME: Well, then there was the Foley Hotel on down

I: Up on _____--

ME: on the right side. Maybe there—yeah, way down there.

I: In La Grande we see the Foley Hotel.

ME: Yeah, it was a—it was a third class motel—uh, hotel compared to the Sacajawea, but it was in business when we were here and a pretty good business at one time.

I: Did you ever stay in any of these hotels?

ME: Mm, I don't think we did, no. Uh, my _____ stayed in a motel here was when we first moved to La Grande. About three nights we stayed in La Grande Motel out on East Avenue which is no longer in there.

I: Yeah, I think in my notes here that you and the Weiser family stayed in that hotel together, wasn't it?

ME: Yeah, motel.

I: Mm-hm. Um, okay. Let's see, yeah, there is a—there is another item here on the sign servicing thing. Your territory actually was outside of La Grande as well as in it?

ME: Oh yeah, we didn't—

I: How far did you go?

ME: made a living just in La Grande.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: We went, oh, over in Idaho and up in Washington. Uh, we did all the Chevron sign servicing and lighting.

I: For the region?

ME: Over to Bend.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: And then one of our best customers was bot—Coca Cola Bottling Company which was in Walla Walla. We worked over there and up at Dayton, Washington. So, I worked there and over at Tri-Cities. Then we'd—

I: So you'd have to travel. Would you have to stay overnight in these places?

ME: Sometimes. More often than not, we'd round-trip it though. We'd—we'd be here at 4:30, 5:00 o'clock in the morning, you know 10:00 o'clock at night or so.

I: Now was any of this work before the freeway opened?

ME: Oh yeah, we uh—yeah, we uh—we came her in '49, and I don't know just when the freeway opened. It'd been—it was uh, I'd say late '50's anyway, or pretty—
[audio ends]

[audio begins]

I: --here with Mel Elder. It's still August 1st, 2005. So, did the free—freeway, or I should say, the lack of a freeway when you first got here, did that present any problems to you as a—as a sign builder for getting things out of the area? For example, I've driven parts of that road between here and Pendleton, and it only takes me forty minutes to get from here to Pendleton, but I don't think it took just that long then. [chuckles].

ME: Well, see an idea when we first moved here, there's not freeway down the Columbia. It was an eight hour trip from here to Portland—

I: Yeah.

ME: which is now four to four and half hours. _____--

I: Now from the maps that I've seen it wasn't a straight shot either. Didn't you—

ME: Oh, no.

I: end up going through every town and village in the—?

ME: Oh, absolutely.

I: Even the Celilo teepee village on your way across—

ME: Yeah.

I: there on the state?

ME: Yeah.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: And so consequently, you—you didn't expect the service that you get nowadays. And you just hoped that everything went fine, and you'd get it within a couple of days if you ordered out of Portland any material. But uh, at that time I wasn't working out of town like we did later on. Most of our work was around Union County or maybe up to Enterprise. We did a lot of work up at Enterprise. There's still some of our work up there.

I: In the beginning here?

ME: Yeah.

I: What work did you do in Enterprise? Who did you—

ME: Oh—

I; build signs for there?

ME: Okay, I can't remember the name of the—it's a carwash, laundry, I believe. The electric signs for them are nice ones. And then one of the nicest jobs we did was—well, we didn't build the sign, but we installed it. It was just a Chrysler—Dodge - Chrysler sign for Milligan Motors up there—not Milligan—Courtney Motors up at Enterprise. And oh, gosh, uh, Circle—Circle Hour Buffet. We did a lot of work for them which is no longer. And worked on like the Stockman's sign and Enterprise Hotel. We did a lot of work for them.

I: Now, how did people find out about you? Uh, you know if you did work clear over to Boise and up into Walla Walla and Dayton and some of these outer regions of the area, was that done by referral, or just how did they find out about you?

ME: Oh, there was a number of ways. A lot of it was personal contact, and—

EE: Chevron.

I: Chevron is a big business.

ME: Oh yeah, that got us out and around by then, but that—that wasn't early on. I mean early on it was like I say Union, Wallowa, Baker County. We used to do quite a lot of work in Baker early times. But um, I made a lot of friends of businessmen, just stopped to see 'em and visit a little bit. Then playin' golf you'd meet a lot of 'em. Well just one thing led to another, you know.

I: What I think we these days call networking.

ME: Mm-hm.

I: Well, did—

ME: We did a little advertising. I always had an ad in the classified phonebook and once in a while in the newspaper.

I: How about radio?

ME: Oh, occasionally, yeah. Oh, we can—matter of fact we built KLBM's sign for 'em. They were set up.

I: Uh-huh.

[audio clicks – no delay]

August 11, 2005

I: And we're finishing up the interview today with Mel Elder. The date is August 11th, 2005. We took a break because of the Union County Fair and other involvement last week. Um, let's go back to a little bit more—um, finish up some of the local stuff that we've talked about in your sign work here. And I

think we had talked just a little bit about the theaters downtown, the State, the Liberty, and the Granada Theatre. Now, were all three of those theaters operating when you came to La Grande?

ME: Yes, they were.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: Yes.

I: Had you ever attended any—any uh—did you go to the theater there?

ME: Oh, yeah. I can't remember any particular shows that we went to see. I remember at one time Liberty Theatre came out with, uh, 3-D movies. You'd—they'd issue you, uh, special glasses when you went in.

I: Uh-huh. What did you think about that?

ME: Well, it's somethin' for sure a lot different than anything we'd ever experienced before.

I: Now did you—when you—when you got these 3-D glasses, were you—did you use those for other shows?

ME: Yeah, as I remember, yeah, we could—we could retain them and use—reuse them.

I: Uh-huh. Um, were any of the—did any of these theaters do any live performances? I—I know that they had in some of the earlier days before you came to town—

ME: There might—

I: from other interviews, but were they doing that when you were here?

ME: No, I don't—I don't remember of any—any live performance.

I: Right. What kind of sign work did you do for any of these theaters?

ME: Oh, at—uh, early on mostly neon repair work.

I: So, you didn't—

ME: _____--

I: put up signs. You—you serviced them.

ME: Yeah, the signs were already there when I came to town, the marquees. And that was mainly it, just maintenance on the existing marquees.

I: Um, how 'bout—you were—we talked a little bit—tell us the story of converting—was it the State Theatre that got converted to the Tropicdara?

ME: Yeah, yeah.

I: Tell us about that.

ME: Well, we took all the lettering off of it and put—put the new lettering up for Tropicdara. And I remember one thing in particular was the state requirement of not being able to see the word “cocktails” more than once on the front of a place of business. Yeah, we put—

I: That was a law? Was that a law at the time?

ME: Yeah, it—it was written into their liquor laws. And without even considering it, we put “cocktails” on both sides of the V-shaped marquee.

I: This V-shaped marquee protruded from the side of the building—

ME: Yes.

I: out onto the street?

ME: Yes. I never thought about it. You could stand right straight across from the theater—or the marquee, you could—you could see “cocktails” on both sides.

I: So, technically—

ME: I'm not sure—

I: it was up there more than once?

ME: you could read it, but they caught it.

I: Did they get fined or in trouble for that?

ME: No, they didn't get fined. We just had to eliminate it on one side.

I: So, they kept the sign, but they took "cocktails"—

ME: Yeah, it—

I: off of one side?

ME: it was just small lettering.

I: Uh-huh. Now did that change later, uh that—

ME: Oh, I think—

I: that law?

ME: I think it has. Yeah, I—

I: Uh-huh. You never were called back to put it back up later—

ME: No.

I: the second one?

ME: No, not—not that I remember, no.

I: Uh-huh. Um, let's move on to talking a little bit about there used to be a—there used to be an event in this area for well over a decade called The Native American Arts Festival, and you had some involvement in that. What—what did you do with—have to do with the—

ME: Well—

I: with that event?

ME: My wife, she helped arrange for housing for different ones that were coming for it and also helped with the providing food. And we had, I think it was four—four girls here from Shiprock, New Mexico stayed with us for two or three days.

I: Did they come back year after year, or—

ME: No—

I: was this a one-year event?

ME: it was only one time.

I: I see.

ME: And it come time to leave, they didn't want to go. They really enjoyed us being here.

I: Uh-huh. Did you do that more than that one year?

ME: I don't recall of it any more than the one year.

I: Mm-hm. Did you know any of the native artisans or people who were involved in sponsoring or operating that event?

ME: At the time it seemed like we—we knew mostly just by knowing who they were. I don't know that we got really acquainted with any of them.

I: Mm-hm. Do you know what a—do you have any idea why that event kind of dissolved?

ME: Oh, I think it was lack of interest.

I: Is that right?

ME: Yeah, I think even the Native Americans sort of start—started losing interest.

I: Did this event ever include a powwow as well as the festival, or did they just stick to sort of an arts and native crafts type of a—?

ME: Oh, I think had dances if I remember right. I think—

I: Ceremonial dancing?

ME: I think they did some ceremonial dancing, yeah. Course, Gladys Price was the head of it here locally.

I: Head of the festival?

ME: Yeah, she was the one that really got behind it and promoted it.

I: Was she a Native American?

ME: No. No, she was not.

I: Uh-huh, I see. Um, let's move on and talk about—let's talk about your church. You are affiliated with which church again in town here?

ME: It's First Christian Church Disciples of Christ.

I: Now um, I think you told me that you were a member of this church, but were you a member of this church all your life?

ME: Uh, no, I—I was a born and raised in the Brethren Church, and then when my wife and I became married she had belonged to the Christian Church, so I—I joined the Christian Church.

I: And you did this before you came to Oregon, or was—

ME: Oh—

I: that after you got here?

ME: not really. No, I think at Tillamook was when I first actually became a member of the First Christian Church. However, that was an independent church where here in La Grande, it's Disciples of Christ.

I: That's a bigger organization then?

ME: Yeah, there—there not really affiliated, but they're similar.

I: I see. Now that's the one you and I talked about that there was a news article recently about the—the—the church leaders had elected a female leader of the church?

ME: Yeah, they had the assembly—the Nation—National Assembly in Portland just two weeks ago, and yes, there was a—a lady elected as the—the President of the Assemblies.

I: I think we also read that women have actually commonly held leadership positions within the church—

ME: Oh yeah, and also—

I: all through its history.

ME: Yeah, we have a number of elders in the church now that are women and as deacons—deaconess also. And my wife and I both have served—have served as elders. And I—I think both of us have been deacons too. I was for years.

I: What are the responsibilities of elders in the church?

ME: Well, in a way they're a leadership and almost—you might consider them assistants to the pastor himself because a lot of times the—any—any illness in the church, they—they do visitations. And they've been known to anoint with oil on people that are real seriously ill and administer the covenants. I'm not sure of the _____ term.

I: That's okay.

ME: They take—I got _____ thoughts.

I: That's okay. We can come back to it if you—

ME: Yeah.

I: if you remember later. How do you get a—is it an appointment to become an elder? How do people—how do people assume those positions?

ME: Well, every—every year the deacons and the elders both have a certain amount of 'em that go off—off duty to every year of rest, you might call it. And so the

nominating committee, who is appointed by the—by the church board, they— they get candidates for either elders or deacons, get their permission. And then—then the congregation votes whether they are accepted or not.

I: Do they do that publicly or by secret ballot?

ME: Oh, it's—it's by secret ballot, yes. [chuckles]. Though what I was trying to tell you a little bit ago was that the elders take communion to shut-ins. That's one of the—

I: Oh, one of their other duties?

ME: Yeah, that's one of the things they do.

I: Mm-hm. So um, how 'bout the deacon then, what are the responsibilities of a deacon or a deaconess?

ME: Well, of course they—they are the ones who serve communion. And they have other duties such as, oh, if there's work parties in the church, they clean up the area, or paint up the church. You can depend on deacons to volunteer to do a lot of that work.

I: Would you categorize this as perhaps uh, like a volunteer workforce, or—?

ME: Well, yeah. Yeah, they would be.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: Yeah.

I: Uh-huh. Many other duties besides that?

ME: Oh, I'm sure that there—there's some that I—I'm overlooking. If I had my—my, oh, mind, I could—I could give you that direct—

I: That's okay.

ME: answer on that.

I: And you've served in both capacities, you and your wife?

ME: Yeah.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: Yes.

I: Are you currently serving in the _____?

ME: Not right now. On uh—

I: Are you on your year break?

ME: Yeah.

I: Uh-huh. Um, now, uh, let's talk a little bit about the First Christian Church here. Um, you told me that that was built in the early '50's, so that church was built after arrived in La Grande?

ME: Yes. That would be--

I: Uh-huh. Did you help with that?

ME: Uh, I didn't really put in much time, as much as I should have probably. I—I was so busy trying to make a go of my—

I: Right

ME: business that that I didn't put in the time that I should have.

I: One other thing, where is this church in La Grande?

ME: It's on Penn. I can't tell you the actual number, but it's on Penn Avenue.

I: Is this—is this the church that's next to the United Methodist Church?

ME: It's back-to-back, yeah.

I: Back-to-back. It's a brick building?

ME: Yeah.

I: Yeah.

ME: Yeah.

I: Um, tell me about the story of getting the—getting the wooden arches for that church.

ME: Oh yeah, it was quite a project, yeah. Harvey Elmer who is one of the elders in the church for years had a sawmill of his own, and he volunteered to cut the timber, have it milled or sawed. He sawed it, and then had it—had it milled, planed, and dried, I guess. And he laminated these huge arches.

I: How many were there?

ME: I think there's a—I think it's four arches. And I can't tell you what the height on them is, but probably—

I: They were big.

ME: forty-five feet long, at least. And—and he laminated them. In order—in order to get the right part on 'em, he had to—I never did see his setup on it, but [chuckles] he had to get these in an arc, bent, glued, and held there until they set up, you know. And then it was certainly quite a project.

I: Where was his sawmill located?

ME: It was out in—it would be east of Alicel, I guess it'd be called that—be northeast of La Grande out in the valley.

I: Do you remember—do you remember the name of the mill?

ME: Oh, it was his own personal, Harvey Elmer—his own personal mill.

I: I see.

ME: And I'm not sure who he had plane the lumber, but I'm sure he must have brought it—had Boise Cascade or somebody do the planing of it.

I: So, to get these uh—this—this might not be in your expertise field, but we're talking about get 'em in the arch shape, does that mean they would've had to uh, do some sort of soaking process in order to bend, or were they cut that way?

ME: There had to be some—some bending on it, but I guess—I've studied 'em, and really the main way of getting the right arch would be using—in—in the area where they made the bend, they used more thicknesses, more laminations. And then as you went out and thinned down, so it comprised the—the bulk of 'em or the—at the point where they went off an up at an angle rather than straight up which is done by just more laminations.

I: Mm-hm. How 'bout getting these to the church, tell us about that.

ME: Well, [chuckles] the story is that they were too wide. In that arc that they formed would be way—way too wide to be legal to haul on a road. And it just so happened at the time, the sergeant of the state police was a member of our church, and they consulted him about bringing them in, and he said, “Well—

I: Who was that?

ME: His name was Dave _____ [sounds like Briskdine].

I: Okay.

ME: And he said, “Well, you bring 'em in, keep on the county roads as much as possible, and I'll see to it that there's no patrolmen out in that area [chuckles] when—when you bring 'em in so that you can get by—bring that way.”

I: Were you around when they got those arches into town? Did you—

ME: No.

I: any of the—?

ME: I didn't—I didn't help with that, no.

I: Now when we talked about this, so were these arches already joined together so they were—

ME: Oh, no.

I: they were—

ME: No.

I: complete, or were they in halves?

ME: They were in halves.

I: I see.

ME: Yeah.

I: Mm-hm.

ME: I might preface this to with when our church was built, the Fellowship Hall and classrooms were completed first, and we held church up in the Fellowship Hall. Well, they have—they have small wooden beams the same as the—in the worship area that he had made. They were on a real smaller—a lot smaller—

I: Scale?

ME: scale.

I: He'd done those for the—for that other Hall?

ME: Yeah, but um—the Worship Hall.

I: Um, it's my understanding this is the Golden Anniversary of the—of the First Christian Church this year.

ME: Yes.

I: Fifty years?

ME: For the building itself—completed building.

I: And you've been a—you've been a member of this congregation ever since you came to town then?

ME: Yes.

I: So, you—so, you've spent fifty years involved with this church?

ME: Oh yeah, uh-huh.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: And longer.

I: Right.

ME: 'Cause I think we—we probably were in the old church for a year or so.

I: Huh. Tell me about this former minister, Gene Robinson, who you said he was here in the '60's.

ME: Yeah. He was—he was the type of person that everybody, they didn't have a minister, they'd call on him to fill the bill. Everybody thought he was the greatest.

I: You mean, other—other churches of—

ME: Well—

I: First Christian or other churches?

ME: Other people that maybe didn't have a—a church.

I: Oh, I see.

ME: They always—always called on him, or if they needed somebody to give an invocation at a meeting, Gene Robinson was the guy. They always called on him. A very effective leader and at that time I think—I think most churches had probably more active members than they do today. But uh, we had probably almost three times as many active members then as we do now. Kind of like any other organization, it seems like the younger people, they—they don't go for organizations. They—they just live a different life.

I: Mm-hm. So, what kinds of uh, things did this Minster Robinson—you said he gave invocations, was he a public speaker?

ME: Oh, uh, yeah, I think—yeah, I guess you'd say so in certain occasions. Did a lot of funerals, a lot of weddings and he'd—he'd be. Yes, he did. He was a very good speaker.

I: What happened to him?

ME: He went onto a ministry. I think it was up Montana—Montana, I believe. And was there for some time and—and eventually he went to Denver. He held a—held a job in at least one, I think, two churches in the Denver area. Then, he passed on several years ago.

I: Um, he was here in the 1960's, so he wasn't the first minister when you came to town then?

ME: Uh, yes, he was.

I: Is that right?

ME: Yeah, he was. We came in '49, and yeah, he was the—he was the minister then on—

I: So, he was—

ME: on through into the '60's.

I: so, he was here quite a while then?

ME: Quite a while, yeah.

I: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

ME: I'd have to look at the—the history in order to be able to tell you the year that he left, but.

I: Okay. Well, that brings up a—a good question then. So, is there a well-documented history of this First Christian Church here?

ME: Oh yes, there is.

I: Is there?

ME: Yes. Dorothy Fleshman, her husband George—live up the canyon towards Morgan Lake, and she's our church historian right now, and she's been doing a lot of work on it. In fact the—the fiftieth anniversary, she did a whole—uh well, put together the history of the church.

I: Like a retrospective?

ME: Yeah.

I: Mm-hm. Is that—is that document available to the public?

ME: Yes, it is. Oh, yeah.

I: Let's talk about another one of your, uh—one of the other social programs that you were involved in here, and that was the Jaycees?

ME: Yes.

I: You belong to the Jaycees?

ME: Yes.

I: What—what was—what's the pur—what's the goal or the purpose of the Jaycee organization?

ME: Uh, Jaycees is short for Junior Chamber of Commerce, and their goal was to do a lot of civic—civic work. Uh, several of the things that I recall is Riverside Park had that a lot of dense brush around the edges, and we'd go out there on weekends and work all day long cleaning that brush out.

I: I see.

ME: And another project I remember is the Little League ball fields that we use today, the original ones, we helped put in the water system. There was a sprinkling system for 'em.

I: Are those fields the ones that are over there by Pioneer Park?

ME: Yes, they are.

I: Uh-huh. Did you hold office with the Jaycees?

ME: Oh, I—I think I was vice president one time, but I was—I was appointed the chairman of the racetrack project.

I: Yes, I want to talk about that. How did that come—tell us, uh, how that came to be first of all.

ME: Well, our—our president who was Emend Smock—Emerson Smock [Emerson Smock is correct.] at the time. He was from Boise, and he'd been in the Jaycees down there. And—and he knew of one Jaycee club that had sponsored a stock car racetrack. So, it seemed like the membership thought that was a pretty good idea, and he pointed his finger at me [chuckles] to be chairman. And uh—
[audio clicks – no delay]

I: And we're finishing the interview with Mel Elder. It is August 11th, 2005. And we're talking about the uh—about the little business venture—not so little it sounds like with the Jaycees—

ME: Yeah.

I: for a stock car race. And you were saying that this is—was being undertaken to raise money?

ME: Yeah, it—it was a money raising project.

I: Mm-hm.

ME: And uh—

I: And you got appointed to be the chairman of the committee?

ME: Yes. Yes, I was.

I: And so—

ME: So, at the first thing that happened, we—we had a wrecking _____ at the time. Oh, I—I'll have to uh, think a minute. Lynn's Villa was a night spot out southeast of town, out on the highway to Union.

I: A night spot?

ME: Yeah.

I: A night club?

ME: A night club and dinner club and they had extra space out there, extra room, so that owner there volunteered to let us use the necessary amount of property to develop this racetrack. And I think probably he had ulterior motives too that it would help his business. Well, the first thing that needed to be done is to recruit the equipment, earth moving equipment. And so I started calling on the various owners of bulldozers, and actually the Soil Conservation District loaned us an earth mover. And I think the grader was—no, the grader was privately owned. So, I—I got—I got at least those three pieces of equipment and operators, and we laid it out and started work on it. Actually, didn't even have a blueprint, just, "Let's do it."

I: Just made it up as you went along?

ME: Our goal was to have a quarter mile track which it turned out to be, so we got the supers—the supers on each end.

I: What are those?

ME: Banked curves around the end—on either end and then the straight away would be straight. And then we got to thinkin' well, it's gonna be awful dusty, so we gotta have water. So we got a party with a backhoe and dug a well right out in the middle of the—out in the middle of the track in the infield. And we had Joe Evers which is the father of Jim Evers who is—still lives here. He had a water wagon, and we pumped water into it. It had a sprinkler on the back of the tank there, and we'd drive around the track and water it.

I: So the track was never paved? It was just graded dirt?

ME: Just—yeah, just graded dirt—dirt track. And unfortunately, it was a bad type of soil. It was sort of a clay. So, when we'd water it, if we watered it too heavy,

the cars would spin out. [chuckles]. We'd get some terrible messes. But in the building of it, one other thing they had to have was a packer. You know to pack the soil and the _____ clipped packer, and then we got the thing. Well, we got to keep those cars on the track, so we got railroad ties, sunk 'em in the ground for posts. And then we went out in the woods and logged logs for a—a railing around it.

I: Around the inside and outside of the track?

ME: Uh, around the outside of the track to keep—

I: [chuckles].

ME: keep the cars from runnin' off into the crowd. And that was all done by hand. [chuckles]. That was quite an undertaking.

I: Was this on—

ME: Just fastening—just fastening those logs to the—to the posts was quite a job too, but we finally got it all organized and started the races.

I: Was this building done within one season then, or one summer, or when did you—

ME: I think—yeah, if I remember right, we did it mostly—started real early, and by the end of the summer we were ready to have a few races.

I: So, tell us about that. How did that—how did that work?

ME: Well, we had a group of racing enthusiasts—enthusiasts that developed their own cars for racing. They'd—I guess they went to the junkyards and got cars and overhauled 'em and got 'em to runnin'. We had several that were outstanding that everybody was after him to beat. His name was Jim _____. He had a machine shop here in La Grande, and he had—he had by far the fastest car on the track.

I: So, this was all local involvement then? And—

ME: Yeah, ninety percent, yeah. I think there was a few that did come in from like Baker and around, but mostly local places.

I: Now, where was that man's machine shop that—?

ME: It was in the alley—oh, let's see, it was behind the what now is _____ Auto Parts.

I: Um, was there an entry fee? How did—?

ME: Oh, yeah. Yeah, they had an entry fee for each race, and the Jaycees handled the money and doled it out according to the race they win or placed in. I think they usually paid three places. And the—the town is supportive of that race day. Excuse me, race day would come along and people would flock out there. And my wife and mother, and one or two of the Jaycee-ettes—well, tech—technically, we got a—an old crate that they ship caskets in.

I: A wooden one?

ME: Yeah, stood it up on end and had a little shelf in it. And Rose would be in there, and that was a ticket booth. They'd take tickets or sell tickets at the—at the entry there. One of the memories we have is that a windstorm came up and blew that darn thing over, and the money just sprayed out over the sagebrush. It was—there was quite a bit out in that area. I spent about half of the race time picking up money out—[chuckles] out there in the sagebrush.

I: Was somebody manning the booth at the time?

ME: Uh, I don't remember what—just how the—I'm probably wrong about it blowing the booth over. It—it blew the cashbox, I guess. That was probably the way it happened.

I: Uh-huh. But it was a casket crate that—

ME: Yeah.

I: that was your ticket booth?

ME: Yeah.

I: Uh-huh. So, where did people sit when they came out for the races? Did you—

ME: We borrowed—

I: have bleachers?

ME: we borrowed bleachers from the city park department. They were good enough to loan it to us. By hook or crook we got ‘em loaded on a trailer and haul ‘em out there. And it was a—it was a real job gettin’ ‘em set up and moved. But as I remember, we kept them out there all summer, then got ‘em back in in the fall probably at fair time.

I: So, this was a summer project or—?

ME: Yeah, it—it was a—it was all done in warm weather. I don’t know. It ran into the fall pretty far, I guess.

I: Mm-hm. What was the object then? Was this racetrack for speed? Is that how they won the prizes?

ME: Oh, yeah!

I: Was it?

ME: Yeah.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: Yeah, the best time.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: They had the special races too, what they called the Powder Puff Derby.

I: And what was that?

ME: Gals—the gals would race. Most of ‘em were wives of guys that were racing. Then they had the—had a race one time of us guys that did the—us Jaycees, the ones that were operating the track.

I: Did you race?

ME: Uh, yeah. Scared me half to death—

I: [chuckles].

ME: to get that thing over twenty miles an hour!

I: What—what car did you race?

ME: Uh, I think it was an old—old Plymouth coupe, I believe it was.

I: Where'd you get it?

ME: It was a friend that had—ran it out there.

I: Uh-huh. Did you win?

ME: No.

I: [chuckles].

ME: No. I was too chicken!

I: Uh-huh.

ME: But it—it was fun.

I: Did, uh—

ME: Some of the girls would get out there and really—really get with it. They'd go almost as fast as the guys. There was occasions that they had pileups that see cars doing end over end up in the air. One of—one of the cars ended up on top of that railing on one end.

I: Huh. Were um—was there any liability involved for doing this?

ME: You know there was—there was a chance for a lot of liability, but we never—we just figured, well, we're a—we're a nonprofit organization. We don't have no—no assets, so we just went without any insurance. It's a wonder somebody wasn't killed. I remember one time a wheel came off the car, and he was goin' full tilt. That wheel ran the full length of that track, jumped over the fence on the end and went out to the—the parking area. It never hit a thing. It could just as well hit a person or a car or most anything, but it didn't _____.

I: So, no—no crowd injuries then during—

ME: No. No—

I: that time? Uh-huh.

ME: we didn't have any.

I: So uh, did you make expenses and have a profit with that?

ME: Oh yeah, we—

I: Did it turn out to be profitable?

ME: we had more money in the treasure than the Jaycees ever had, but it added up to about ten cents an hour for the amount of time that—

I: [chuckles].

ME: we put in. I was out there—in the summertime, I'd—I'd be out there every—every night clear 'til dark after work.

I: Doing what?

ME: Workin' on the track. And then of course, we all had to be there on race day.

I: Was race day on the weekends? Was it just one day?

ME: Oh, yes.

I: So, the week at Sundays?

ME: Yeah.

I: And the community liked it, huh?

ME: Oh, yeah.

I: It was popular?

ME: They _____ they'd _____.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: Uh, every race was—the bleachers was full.

I: Uh-huh. Um, what became of that track?

ME: After two years—after two summers run—operating it, we—we became just too tired of workin' there, and we turned it over to the Racing Association. And they ran it—I—I don't think it was any more than one year, maybe—maybe two. And there was just too much dissention. They—they couldn't agree on things, and of course they were all competitive racing against one another.

I: And so they were also racers as well?

ME: Yeah, just—just died out.

I: Uh, any—any of that remain in the area? What's become—

ME: I don't think—

I: of the place?

ME: there's any evidence at all. It's B & K Auto Salvage now, and—and it's just solid wrecked cars an old cars.

I: That's the one out here on the way to Union?

ME: Yes.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: Yes.

I: And that's where it was located?

ME: Yeah.

I: Uh-huh. How 'bout your wi—was that—that turned into a—that turned into a second job then just about?

ME: That's just about what it amounted to. Yeah, I'd get up sometimes 5:00 o'clock in the morning and go out there and work, then go to my business and work, and then go out there again in the evening and work. It was a—it was a full-time job keeping things going. We had a raised stand there where some of our Jaycees would be up there in that stand, and they were the—they were the time keepers and ran—actually ran the race from up there.

I: So it was all Jaycee labor?

ME: Yeah.

I: From building the thing to—

ME: Oh, I should say—

I: operating it?

ME: all that because there was a—there were volunteers that helped build it. And then like I say, this Joe Evers, he provided that water truck and—and saw that it was out there waterin' the track whenever it needed it.

I: And all of this was done voluntarily?

ME: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

I: That's a good effort on the part of the community. Well, I think we're about wrapped up here, but let's just do some brief talking about some of your other organizational work. We've talked about the Festival _____ and the Jaycees. You talked about having been on the Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors.

ME: Yeah, for quite a few years. I don't know how—just how long. I never held any other office in the Chamber.

I: What did they—what was their purpose? What did they do?

ME: Uh, promoting the—the town and the county. Basically, it'd be the same as they are right now. Any—any promotional thing that they can—

I: Do you get in—

ME: sponsor.

I: do you get invited to be on the Chamber of Commerce, or do they—?

ME: Oh, you get elected in, yeah.

I: But I mean is that—is that something that business owners would sort of be kind of expected to be involved in? It helps them out?

ME: Yeah, it's—it's uh—Chamber of Commerce members that are elected to serve as Board—on the Board.

I: And so you were a member of the Chamber of Commerce? Your business—

ME: Oh, yeah.

I: was a member?

ME: Yeah, for years.

I: Uh-huh. Any particular—they do anything special or memorable or—?

ME: Well, one of our top promoters in the area was David Baum, Sr. He was an attorney and very active in the community. He also end—ended up as a Gen—General in the—in the National Guard.

I: I believe he was the Adjutant General of the state of Oregon at one time.

ME: Yes, yes and a very good promoter of the area. Uh, he helped promote a lot of industrial development. _____, I think, had a big hand in developing the industrial park out where Terry Industries—Terry Potato Plant, out in that area. If I remember right, he was—he was really a big promoter of that, and I'm not sure but what he was also—helped promote the industrial area out at the airport. But there was many things that he—he helped promote to the betterment of the county and city.

I: I also have you down as having served on the Red Cross Board.

ME: Yeah, I spent, oh, I don't know, one or two terms on the Red Cross Board.

I: Any particular activities or things you were involved in during that?

ME: Oh, usually it was just fund—fund raising mostly and trying to accumulate more members that were interested.

I: Did you hold any office with the Board, or were you—

ME: No.

I: just a member of the Board?

ME: No, I was just a Board _____.

I: Well, I think we've covered a lot of material here. I—I think that we're gonna see that you've made a big contribution to—to knowledge about the area and the history here in Union County.

ME: Well, I hope that—it's not official. I probably—probably my most active, other than church, was the La Grande Country Club.

I: What did you do with them?

ME: I—I held office in there. I was one of the Board of Directors for a number of years, and then I was superintendent of the—or Chairman of the Greens Committee which was the operation of the course itself. Then I served as vice president and became president. That was under David Baum, Sr. When he passed away, then I became president.

I: You mean you were vice president at the time of his death?

ME: Yes.

I: Uh-huh. Now, the La Grande Country Club is a private organization?

ME: A private organization.

I: It's a social, golf—

ME: Yeah.

I: what kinds of activities do they—are they involved in?

ME: Of course, everything, or a big part of it is centered around golf itself. My wife and I _____ maybe with about four or five other couples, we started the Fairway Frolics which a man-wife tournament. And it's still in operation, and this had been 196—1971. And people come from various places, from Walla Walla, Pendleton, all over the area playing in that.

I: So that's open to the public, that tournament?

ME: Uh, yeah. Yeah, any couple that wants to get in.

I: How do you—is it—how do you join the club? Is it by invitation?

ME: Uh, it's—

I: No, you just join on your own?

ME: You just join on your own. You go out to the—the _____ golf pro out there, and they give you an application for 'em. And that's presented to the Board, and they decide whether you're eligible for membership or not.

I: Do you know what makes you eligible?

ME: Well, of course, it's been a long time since I was on that Board, but I imagine it's more or less the same way. The—they have a—might have a little background on your character and know whether you have a decent credit rating and—and know if your—your upstanding and—or upstanding resident.

I: Citizen?

ME: Citizen. But I did a lot of—lot of volunteer work out there on my own. When I had the sign company, I used to—I used to go out with my equipment and trim trees, and—and the wife and I worked and planted flowers. I built them a flower bed and things of that nature. And I built a—I laid brick pylons out on the front entrance and installed a sign—overhead sign over the entryway, things of that nature. I—I also designed the guard shed with a—who expanded on considerably since I designed the first bunch of 'em, and they kept adding on.

I: Uh, _____ said that they had a golf course. Is there also a clubhouse or a restaurant bar?

ME: Yeah, they have a lounge in the bar. Then we—been recently, they did a complete overhaul on the social whole part of it, and just made a beautiful job out of it. And dining room and places to holler and hold—to hold dances. And so now they—they do have a lot of special like wedding parties and reception parties there. And—and oh, for instance like a celebration for golden anniversaries and things of that nature.

I: Is it—

ME: They rent the Hall.

I: is—so, the Hall is open to the public. Is the lounge open to the public?

ME: Not really.

I: Mm-hm.

ME: Yeah.

I: For members?

ME: If you—if you went to the club as a guest of a member, then of course you can have a _____ in the bar and all that, and for you to walk in off the street, no.

I: Is the golf course a public course?

ME: No.

I: It's members only?

ME: Members only. You can have—you can have in-county guests play golf there twice a year, but out of county, anybody can play by paying green fees.

I: At the golf course?

ME: At the golf course.

I: Without a—without a—

ME: Without a member.

I: without a member?

ME: Yeah.

I: I see.

ME: Yeah, if you're from out of county.

I: Okay, so if you're in-county, you don't have to be there with a member either, but you say you can—you can—?

ME: No, yeah. If you're—if you live in—if you live in-county and want to play the course, you've got to go with a member.

I: I see. And you can do that up to twice a year?

ME: Yeah, yeah.

I: Is that to stimulate membership then—then for business?

ME: Uh, yeah, probably so.

I: Yeah.

ME: Now every spring they have a—the membership drive when they—they have to _____ the initiation fee and cut it way down, half or less, 'cause you get new members.

I: You and your wife have been a member of the club for a long time.

ME: Forty-eight years.

I: Uh, do you pay dues? Is there a life membership category there?

ME: Well, that's something that [chuckles] they're supposedly working on now.

I: Oh. So they don't currently have one?

ME: Uh, the minute—or the by-laws state that after fifty years of continued membership, then you get—become a life member.

I: At which point then you wouldn't pay dues because of that?

ME: That's right.

I: Uh-huh. And they're working on this now, you said?

ME: Yeah. I don't know what—I don't know what the Board will come up with on it. There's quite a bit of controversy.

I: Will the—will the membership of the organization vote on that at some point?

ME: Not likely.

I: It's decided by the Board?

ME: It'll be the Board, right, the Board of Directors.

I: So the Board of Directors make decisions that affect the entire club?

ME: Oh, yeah, yeah.

I: Mm-hm.

ME: They—they run—they run the _____ organization. The club though has been made manager also, so.

I: Would that be similar to being superintendent?

ME: Well, manager of the club, yeah.

I: Oh, of the club?

ME: Yeah. He's still supposedly under the—the Board of Directors. He can make certain decisions, but any—any big decisions has to go through the Board.

I: It's so similar to being an executive director to an organization.

ME: Sort of, yeah. That'd be the—that'd be an explanation of it.

I: Then, the Halls where they do—where they can do receptions or golden anniversary things, is that open to the public for rental?

ME: Yes, it is.

I: Right. And that's one of the ways they—they make income now?

ME: Yeah, there's income from that.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: I'm not sure what they charge for it now, but it's—I really can't say.

I: And I imagine that—now do you get reduced fees when you go to golf then by being a member?

ME: Get what?

I: Do you get reduced fees to play—

ME: Oh—

I: as a member?

ME: if you're a member that takes care of all your golf.

I: I see.

ME: Yeah, you can play as much as you want to with no—no extra charge.

I: How often do you golf these days?

ME: I—I—usually I'm out there three days a week.

I: Uh-huh.

ME: Yeah, on Tuesday and Thursday and Saturday. There's a—_____ it seems to be out there about every day. [chuckles].

I: Mm-hm.

ME: They got—they've got a good community program. Uh, Wednesday's—

I: What's that about?

ME: Wednesdays is Women's Day.

I: What's a junior program?

ME: Oh, the pro puts on a free school. Any—any youngsters that want to participate whether they're members or not, they can come out and—and get these free lessons to get 'em started.

I: Did the—do—does the high school or the university use the course—

ME: Yes, they do.

I: for their golf programs?

ME: Yes, they do. The high school, I—the college has been an on-again off-again playing and having teams. Back, oh, in the early '70's they usually had a college team. In fact, my son, he—he got a golf scholarship when he got out of high school and down in Texas. And then his junior year of college, he came to La Grande, and he took—he went to the school up here at Eastern Oregon and was a member of their golf team. But in recent years, I—I don't think they've—the high school, yes, they've got a team. But the college, I don't think it does anymore.

I: And you said there's a Women's Day. What is that about?

ME: Well, on Wednesdays, the women have exclusive use of the golf course up until I'm gonna say 2:00 o'clock. Then, the men come out and play. On Thursdays is Men's Day, and women are allowed to come out and play up 'til—so that they will finish before—before—

[audio ends]

