

Norma Flanagan
Place: La Grande, Oregon
Interviewer: Eugene Smith
10/23/02

Tape 1 Side 1

ES: Would you give me your full name, including your Maiden name?

NF: Norma Jean (Goodwin) [?] Flanagan.

ES: And you were born where?

NF: In Elgin.

ES: About when?

NF: 1939.

ES: Your parents had been living in Elgin? Or no, you were...

NF: No my parents lived at the Mt. Emily Lumber Company.

ES: That's right. And the reason you came to Elgin to be born was...

NF: My grandparents were there. I was born in my grandmother's home.

ES: Yes. At that time the Grande Ronde Hospital existed, why not there?

NF: Uh...mother just wanted to be at home with her family. And she knew the old doctor who just lived two or three blocks from the house. And so...

ES: Do you remember that doctor's name?

NF: Bennett.

ES: Doctor Bennett. He was a physician who worked primarily in Elgin? Or did he cover a larger area?

NF: I think so. I don't know.

ES: Ok. So as an infant you went back to the Mt. Emily Lumber Camp.

NF: Yes, I was just a few weeks old when we went back up there.

ES: Yes, and about when do your memories of life in that camp begin? At what age?

NF: Oh probably maybe three or four. I very faintly remember the first house that we lived in. And then when we moved up, just right next door to another house, I remember that a lot clearer. And I remember my dad and my uncle putting the water in. And I remember dad studying by the...or doing his time books by the kerosene lamp because that was a little brighter. Or maybe that was the only lamp we had right then; I'm just not quite sure of that.

ES: And when you say you remember your dad doing his time books; what was his job there at the mill?

NF: Uh it wasn't a mill.

ES: Mill Camp. Lumber Camp yeah.

NF: He worked in the woods, but...he drove logging truck and he bumped knots; he did various things. And it would depend on the season as to...you know if it was in the springtime they weren't hauling logs, so he was doing something else. And at one time when I was six, he was laid off up there and he went to work for the state down here in LaGrande. And we came down here and I went to school at Greenwood School for just a few weeks, while they were laid off up there.

ES: When you say that one of his jobs was to bump knots, what does that mean?

NF: Uh, the...take the limbs off the logs, you know they fall the trees and there's limbs on it. That's cutting off all the bumps and limbs and knots that are on the logs.

ES: What sort of tool would he use then? Some kind of saw?

NF: An axe.

ES: An axe? Oh. That sounds like fairly skilled work to get that done correctly. Did you watch him do it?

NF: No. No it was done out in the woods.

ES: Did he describe it at all? That you remember?

NF: He must have because I knew what he did? {Laughter}

ES: Yes, yes. Labor intensive compared to the present. I don't think they do that at the present do they?

NF: I don't know how they take them off now. They must have to somehow. I would think they would have to, but I don't know.

ES: And when you said he kept his time books, why did he need to do that?

NF: Well I think he kept track of not just his, but several of the men that were on his crew I believe. I'm not positive about that.

ES: Was he kind of a foreman?

NF: I don't know at that time what...I was quite small when he did that so I really don't remember. I just remember him sitting at the table doing that.

ES: Among those memories that you were recounting that you first recall, the kerosene lamps and so on. What else do you remember about the house that you lived in?

NF: I remember how terribly cold it was in the wintertime. And we would come home from town; we would come down here on Saturdays. And we would go home and it would be so cold. All we had was wood fires at that time. And we would go next door to our neighbor's, Johnny's house. He was an old bachelor. He was always home and his house was warm. We would go over there and wait until our house got warmed up; then we would go back home.

ES: Suppose your house was un-insulated?

NF: Oh there was no insulation. They were single board walls I do believe.

ES: They were erected as temporary structures?

NF: Yes they were...houses that were on skids. And they had been...they'd not been moved since we lived there. But they had been in different places before that. And I did see them move a few houses in as a child.

ES: Do you think they were erected for worker's families?

NF: Exactly. Uh huh.

ES: Comfort wasn't exactly the first criteria huh?

NF: Well they were pretty comfortable really. As time went on...

ES: Except for the cold.

NF: Yeah. Uh huh.

ES: That never improved.

NF: Well when we got oil stoves, that really helped. It made quite a difference not to have a cold house to come home to.

ES: How many rooms did it have?

NF: We had two bedrooms, a living room, kitchen. The first house didn't. It was just a two room.

ES: And they were plumbed? No.

NF: No way. We had outhouses.

ES: How did you get your water for drinking and washing?

NF: Well we...when I was quite small, I must've been about four I think. That's when dad dug the ditch and put the water into the house. Otherwise we had a faucet outside that everyone had to go out and get water from.

ES: And he dug the ditch to install pipes?

NF: Mhm.

ES: Yes. And what was the source of that water?

NF: Uh, there was a springhouse. It was up between the upper and lower camp. And our water up there was wonderful. It was really good water. To this day I can't stand the chlorine in the water. It was such good water up there. Always so cold and...

ES: Was that erected for the use of all of the residents?

NF: Yes.

ES: So everyone had the option of piping into it?

NF: Oh yes. We had faucets that were throughout camp so that...before it was piped into the houses so you could just go out to the faucet and get it. You didn't have to go up to the springhouse.

ES: But the additional pipes were the option of the person who was living there?

NF: I think so. That's what dad did. I don't know if everyone did their own or if it was done by company people.

ES: And did every one of these houses have it's own outhouse? Or was there a communal one?

NF: Oh yes. No, everyone had their own. {Laughter}

ES: Did that have to be reinstalled periodically?

NF: Oh they had to be moved. {Laughter} I remember Halloween being a time when I was very small...that kids went around tipping them over. I do remember that.

ES: Oh yes. What happened as a result of that?

NF: Oh some of them got in trouble. {Laughter}

ES: Could they just be put back into position without too much effort?

NF: I don't remember.

ES: You don't. {Laughter}

NF: I don't. As I got older, that didn't happen.

ES: Mhm. So was it...outhouses throughout the time you lived there?

NF: Oh yes. Mhm. I think I remember there was one family; I used to baby-sit for them. As I was like 7th and 8th grade and they had a bathroom. I think they were the only ones in the whole camp who did.

ES: This may seem a strange question, but as you grew a little bit older and maybe talked to other people your age; in LaGrande or other places. Did it seem to you that there was anything at all glamorous about living in a logging camp?

NF: Not at all glamorous, no. It was just home.

ES: But it was different surely in many ways from the way people in town, in LaGrande and other towns lived.

NF: It wasn't that different.

ES: No?

NF: Not really. We may have been closer, everybody in camp. They were all good friends. And everybody kind of looked out after everybody else's kids. You know, if you did something you shouldn't, your parents were going to find out about it.

ES: It was a tight community?

NF: Yes, very much so.

ES: Were there any minority families living there?

NF: Oh we had Indian people, and we had Greek people, Japanese. And they were all really nice. Lots of old Swedes that worked on the railroad.

ES: Did some of them speak their native languages?

NF: Oh yes.

ES: Did you hear that?

NF: Oh yes.

ES: Learn any?

NF: No. No I didn't learn it.

ES: Pick up a word or two here and there?

NF: Oh I may have done that but that was about it.

ES: Well that certainly gave it an air of the unusual.

NF: One Greek boy came over. His name was Fullet Sackas [?] and his father worked up there. And he came over from Greece and he couldn't speak a word of English. And so he came to school and we all helped him learn to speak English. And he learned it quite quickly. We made books and pointed to animals and would say the name and he would say it. And I remember he learned to ride my bicycle. He had never been on a bicycle and he was a teenager.

ES: When he arrived?

NF: Yes.

ES: 13, 14, 15?

NF: Maybe 15 or 16. He wasn't a really little kid at all.

ES: Did he come by himself or with his family?

NF: Just him, he came here to his dad; as I remember. I don't think there was a mother in the picture at all, here that I knew of.

ES: You started at school when you were in first grade, would you describe the school?

NF: Well um, I think in about 1945, there were three of us who started first grade together. That was Gary Pearson,[?] Annette Taal [?] and me. And I think that was in 1945, I'm not positive.

ES: The school was made like many of the other buildings out there, using old freight cars?

NF: It was boxcars, wooden boxcars that they put together and built a hall and a coatroom in between the two boxcars.

ES: Do you think they used boxcars because that was the cheapest way to erect a building for some other purpose?

NF: And to be able to move it I'm sure.

ES: Oh yes. It didn't have the wheels on it still did it?

NF: I think it did. It was boxed in below so you couldn't see it, but I think the wheels were on them. I'm not positive, but I think they were.

ES: Now boxcars aren't insulated, was the school insulated?

NF: Oh no, nothing was insulated. {Laughter} But it was very warm in the winter; we always had a good fire.

ES: Was that an oil stove?

NF: No we had wood.

ES: And it was wired for electricity?

NF: Oh yes, uh huh. And we had uh...

ES: Did it have an outhouse also?

NF: Oh yes.

ES: And a sink inside?

NF: Oh yes, inside sink and faucet, or fountain to drink from. And we would come in each day, and we always had to wash our hands and get a drink before we went in to sit down. Um...

ES: Two teachers?

NF: Two teachers. The lower four grades were in one side, and the other four in the other.

ES: Were the two rooms furnished similarly?

NF: Yes. We had regular school desks with an armrest and the desk like this yanno. The seat, with the fold up seat.

ES: So they could be moved in various configurations.

NF: Well they were in rows. They were attached in rows.

ES: Oh they were attached together?

NF: Yes. We had two rows. We had blackboards on one side of the room and windows on the other. A huge big dictionary on a big stand. People were encouraged to use that anytime they needed to.

ES: And a teacher's desk?

NF: Oh yes, Mhm. That was up at the front.

ES: Bookshelves?

NF: Oh yes, mhm.

ES: Did you have your own little library in the room? Or did they have a traveling library maybe that came by truck?

NF: Um I believe the library from LaGrande came up and brought books and we were able to check things out. I don't really remember real clear on that, but I think that's what happened.

ES: The school supplied all your textbooks?

NF: Yes.

ES: What did you have to supply?

NF: Just the paper and pencils was all I remember.

ES: Notebooks probably.

NF: Yeah that type of thing.

ES: And school would go each day from what, 9 in the morning till...

NF: 9:00 till 4:00.

ES: 4. With an hour off for lunch?

NF: Yes.

ES: You went home for lunch?

NF: Yes.

ES: Everybody?

NF: Yes uh huh.

ES: Now there's a little creek between houses where you were living and that school, it's still there.

NF: Yes. Meadow Brook.

ES: What sort of a...bridge, or how did you get across the creek?

NF: Well it was a bridge that the cars drove on and it had a _____ [?] thing over the top like this, the bridge _____ [?] like this and rails on the side. Some of the kids would climb up and walk that, but I never did. I didn't like high places but I remember my sister doing it and my mother catching her. {Laughter} She didn't do it again.

ES: In the spring I imagine that creek was quite full.

NF: Very high, mhm.

ES: Was that bridge ever close to the water?

NF: Yes quite close.

ES: Quite close. When you say the curve thing at the top, this was the construction of the bridge there, sort of an arch to suspend it.

NF: Yeah.

ES: That's no longer there. Do you think that was built...you said the cars drove over it; did it need to be a bridge that could accommodate a lot of traffic?

NF: Yes, that was the main route through the camp at that time. That road up above that goes up the highway; that wasn't there it went...the whole road went right through camp. It didn't come in from where it is now either; it came down the canyon.

ES: Mhm. Surely though, the people who lived and worked there didn't need to use the bridge except to walk across did they?

NF: Oh no, everybody drove over it.

ES: So it would have just been what, cars coming in from LaGrande or elsewhere?

NF: Well the people who worked...who lived there used their cars to go up to the commissary and wherever they _____ [?]

ES: That's what surprises me, such a short distance, why would they need to do that?

NF: I don't know, but they did. {Laughter}

ES: Did most of the people who lived there have cars?

NF: Yes, uh huh.

ES: Where did they put the cars?

NF: Just parked outside their house.

ES: I didn't think there would be quite enough space.

NF: Oh yeah, there was plenty of room. Dad built a garage on our house.

ES: Let's return to life in the school. What other details of how the school day was set up; or what other activities went on in connection with the school?

NF: Well we played on the playground for about a half hour before school each day. Then we...

ES: Even in the snow?

NF: Oh yes, uh huh. We had lots of fun in the snow.

ES: Yes.

NF: Then we had the pledge and sang songs, and the teacher would call on each one; on different ones to choose which songs they would like to sing. Songs like God

Bless America, Stars and Stripes and My Old Kentucky Home,
_____ [?] and Oh What a Beautiful Morning. Then we would have math and reading. Then at 10:30 we would have recess for 15 minutes. And lunch at noon. Then we would be back to school for a half hour recess before school, and then we'd be back in by 1:00. We'd have Geography in the afternoon and then we could read library books in our free time. And the teacher read every day for a half hour after lunch, and that was something we all really enjoyed. She read really good books that we really liked. We got to pick out the books, she would get several and we would vote on which one we wanted to have her read. And then the outside activities that we did; we did such things as bicycle riding and hiking and flower picking and horseback riding, playing in the creek and sleigh riding and skating and jump rope. In the spring jump rope was a real big thing. And playing on the tie pile. On our end of the camp we enjoyed doing that quite a bit.

ES: That's T.I.E. as in railroad tie?

NF: Right. Railroad ties, there was great big stacks of them; and we would just leap all over there. {Laughter}

ES: Somewhat dangerous?

NF: No I don't think it was. They weren't stacked super high; and they were pretty...If it had been dangerous, my mom would not have let us do it. And MayDay was a real big deal. We would pick flowers and make pretty little May baskets and go around and put them on everybody's door; knock and run so they didn't see who got...

ES: The fairies had left them.

NF: Yeah. Then the speeder rides in the spring was a real fun thing getting to do that.

ES: Describe the speeder.

NF: It was just a little car that...a rail car that they used to maintain the tracks.

ES: It was operated by a hand pump?

NF: I don't think so.

ES: Or did it have a motor?

NF: It had a motor, yeah. I'm sure they had motors. They went right along. We would take two of those and go up to Frog Heaven [?] and take a picnic lunch. Everybody took their own sack lunch.

ES: Where was Frog Heaven?

NF: Up above Starkey. Way up the track up in there. I don't know how many miles, maybe ten, I don't know.

ES: Now when you said you took one of these speeders, do you mean that the company would allow kids to borrow them?

NF: Oh no no. No, the...Gus Tsiatios was one of the speeder drivers and someone else was one of the other ones. He was the maintenance foreman for the railroad up there.

ES: So would he do this in his spare time or as part of his regular job?

NF: Well every year they did it. They just worked it in for us.

ES: Mhm. How many people could it accommodate at one time?

NF: Oh I don't know. We must have had 15 on each speeder I guess, something like that.

ES: It's larger than I visualized then.

NF: They're pretty good sized and they would set up on the top and on the bottom row both.

ES: Was it noisy?

NF: Not...oh a little bit, but not terribly.

ES: I imagine kids thought that was wonderful.

NF: Oh it was fun; it was great fun.

ES: Yes. And you would go to Frog Heaven for the day? Spend most of the day there? Was it woodsy?

NF: Well there was...yeah there's woods all around; there is everywhere up there. And the creek, it was real marshy like around there. Catch frogs and tadpoles, it was just kind of a nature outing type thing. Kind of a fun thing to reward us for being good all year.

ES: Oh yes. And any other adults go along?

NF: I can't remember any others, just the speeder drivers and the teachers.

ES: So all the kids in the school were able to go on this trip?

NF: Yes.

ES: Did you have to have special permission from parents?

NF: No.

ES: You took a school day to do this?

NF: Yeah, mhm.

ES: When you spoke about having geography in the afternoon, can you tell me how geography was presented?

NF: We studied a geography book and answered questions and did tests and just pretty much the same type thing the kids do now I think.

ES: Um. Names of countries, names of capitals of countries; that sort of thing?

NF: Yes.

ES: Mountain ranges?

NF: Oh yes.

ES: Products?

NF: All of that. We had good teachers.

ES: But most of the content came from the textbook rather than from the teacher?

NF: Well both.

ES: What would the teacher add to the text book?

NF: Oh gosh I don't know.

ES: Did she have a map up in the front of the room?

NF: Oh yes we had lots...

ES: She would use a pointer to direct your attention?

NF: Definitely, yes those type things.

ES: And then maybe ask questions about, what's the name of this country and what products does it raise, what's the climate.

NF: Mhm.

ES: Did you find that interesting?

NF: Yes, I liked geography.

ES: Was that about the 4th grade? Or maybe several grades you did that.

NF: Yeah I think we pretty much studied geography pretty much clear through. You know, from the upper grades. Probably 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th.

ES: Was there any science connected with that?

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