CLAYTON FOX

Union County resident for 85 years

AN ORAL HISTORY

Interviews in August & September 2002
at his home in Imbler OR

Interviewer: Emily Correll

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

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(revised from 2003)

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

A non-profit, tax-exempt corporation formed in 2002

In collaboration with Eastern Oregon University
Cove Improvement Club History Committee
Elgin Museum & Historical Society
Union Museum Society

Purposes

To record & publish oral histories of long-time Union County residents
&
To create a community encyclopedia

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copies of transcripts are $4.00 each + shipping & handling

Preface

Much of the history of a place is stored in the memories of people who have lived there. Their stories may be told to family members, but, unless someone makes a special effort to record these stories, they become lost to future generations.

Each of the historical societies in Union County, Oregon has begun to make that effort. Tape recordings exist in several locations, some of them transcribed in written form, others not. A more ambitious and thorough effort seemed necessary so that more of the oral history of Union County could be captured and preserved.

The Union County, Oregon History Project, begun in 2002, is making that more ambitious effort. One of its principal purposes is to collect as many oral histories of older Union County residents as possible and to make them available in both taped and written form. This edited transcript is part of the series of oral histories to be produced by that project.

About the Interviews and This Edited Version

Two interviews with Clayton Fox took place at his home in Imbler. At age eighty-five, Clayton appears to be healthy and vigorous, mentally and physically.

The interviewer was Emily Correll, a student at Imbler High School and a volunteer with the Union County, Oregon History Project. Emily completed two one-hour interviews in August and September, 2002.

Heather Pilling's full transcription (available for research purposes) presents the literal contents of both interviews. The edited version presented here differs from the literal transcription in the following characteristics:

- reorganization of content
- deletion of some extraneous comments
- omission of false sentence starts and other normal speech fillers that detract from readability
- normalization of pronunciation and grammar in conformity with standards of written English.

CF designates Clayton Fox's words, *I* the interviewer's.

CONTENTS

Life-long Resident of Union County

CF: Probably the first thing to say is I'm eighty-five years old and I've lived in this same house for eighty-one years. I was born in Imbler--but in another house--and we moved here when I was about four years old. My father wasn't in farming at all until he retired from the grain company, which is Grande Ronde Grain of Island City. They had warehouses in Imbler, Elgin, Union, and La Grande. When he got married, he came to Imbler as the miller for the plant here. At that time the flour was being sent to China mostly. Then they had some domestic branches, too, so that it was sold here because almost everybody in those times bought their flour by the sack or barrel. Four sacks could be enough for the winter.

Participating in 4-H Projects

I: How did you begin 4-H?

CF: I got started in 4-H because there used to be about forty thousand head of range sheep here in Union County. They would be driven down the road and taken to different pastures and the hills. The driver gave me an orphan lamb when they went by here. I raised him on a bottle. About the time he got close to a hundred pounds, he fell down the hill where we had it staked down right out at the front of the house and choked to death. I felt so bad about this lamb dying that the next year the folks brought me a couple of ewes. That's how I started on my 4-H project.

We had no farm ground at that time, so, in our later years, after my father retired from the mill, we bought some ground at the edge of Imbler. I first had two acres, where I handled my 4-H projects. We'd milk the cows two or three times daily by hand and bring the milk up to the house, separate it, and then carry it back down that evening to feed the hogs.

We always had a big garden. Then we gradually went into farming. My dad wasn't a good farmer. We can just put it that way. My father never wanted to get big in farming. He always said that a small farm was the one that doesn't go broke. I farmed for my lifetime after I came out from college.

I: Describe your involvement in 4-H.

CF: My experience in 4-H was fantastic; I can't say enough for 4-H. State fair was an important part of my 4-H experience. We had a freight car that we loaded in La Grande. We'd build a deck on that freight car. It took about a third of the car, and over that deck we put our hay, straw, and grain that we needed for the animals we were taking. Under the deck we put the sheep and the hogs. We also had two or three barrels of water for the animals because it took us two or three days on the freight train to go to Salem. I think it was for about nine or ten years that we did that every year to get to the state fair and again a month later in Portland for the Pacific International Show. It was always a lot of fun.

There was only supposed to be one person on the car with livestock going down, but there'd usually be four or five members that we'd get up in the attic. Sometimes we got kicked off of the freight train by the railroad bulls, as we called them in those times. When we got kicked off, we had to hitchhike down to the fair. If we couldn't make it, we'd use our spending money to buy a bus ticket to get there by the time the freight train got there to be unloaded.

Another thing is kind of different. We always really tried to have a big Holstein milk cow or Jersey milk cow with us on the freight car, and, if we ran out of goodies that our mothers fixed for us on the trip to Salem, we had milk to drink. If we spent all our money at the carnival and didn't have much money to get food on coming back home, we could get a couple loaves of bread and have some good, fresh milk. Money was just scarce enough back in those times that we even sold paper cups full of milk at the state fair. We'd sell the milk to the city kids from Portland and Salem--a glass of milk for a nickel.

I: What types of opportunities did 4-H open up for you?

CF: 4-F started me out with farming; I stayed in it after I got out of high school.

I: What did you do after you graduated from high school?

CF: I didn't go to college for three years; instead I spent quite a bit of that time working at the sawmill in La Grande--Bowman-Hicks. I had my 4-H cattle and I worked with them on the nights and mornings. When I got this nice new award in leadership, that opened up a lot of things. I made two trips back to Chicago to the national 4-H Congress. Then I came back home and started farming after college.

I always figured that the main thing I was interested in and wanted to do was farming. My father wasn't a farmer, and we had no farm ground at that time.

I: So you just wanted to be a farmer when you grew up?

CF: Yes. That's about the only thing. I had a chance to go into the bank when I got out of high school. They told me I'd spend two years probably local and then I should go to college at University of Oregon. And when they told me I should go to University of Oregon, I decided I didn't want to be a banker. I was sold on Oregon State from being down there at 4-H summer school several times.

Experiences with Farming in Union County

I: What do you know about the history of farming in Union County?

CF: They sold lots of flour to China. They had a mill at La Grande and Island City, Imbler, and one at Elgin at that time. And people in the valley here bought flour by the sack--a forty-nine-pound sack, I think. You got those big sacks in for the winter and that was it. And most all their baking and things were done at home in those days.

The main agricultural crops that have been good to the farmers of Union County are grass seed and mint. We did have a market for green peas--cannery peas--spinach, and things like that by trucking them to Milton-Freewater [about eighty miles northeast of Imbler, near the Oregon-Washington border]. That's all dried up, so we're now mostly on our own.

We've raised almost anything that we think we can make some money on. We've raised string beans. We've raised spinach. We've raised carrot seed. We've raised grass seed, which is our wonderful crop here. I've been in on the grass seed from the time it was started here in Union County. Howard Wagner is the one that came in here and started it. We had a concrete storage here where

Clayton with 4-H trophy, 1930s
Photo courtesy of Clayton Fox

Clayton with hogs he raised, 1930s
Photo courtesy of Clayton Fox

Clayton (2nd from left) as first prize winner of Holstein Herd, Oregon State Fair, 1934, showed by Union County
others from left, Bob Becker, Cove; Howard Smith, 4-H County Agent;
Vernon Stoddard, La Grande; Trey Becker, Cove
Photo courtesy of Clayton Fox

Howard put his grass seed in the summer and in the fall. Then he'd have it cleaned, and we'd put apples in the warehouse in the wintertime.

Imbler as a Major Producer of Apples

CF: At first Imbler was considered to be the apple county--maybe even the apple capital--of the United States. I have been told that it started from a tree that was way back in the northwest comer of Summerville towards the Jim Lloyd place. I have heard that the tree had some beautiful apples, and a picture was taken that real estate dealers in La Grande used to advertise in New York. That's the way the apple industry got started here.

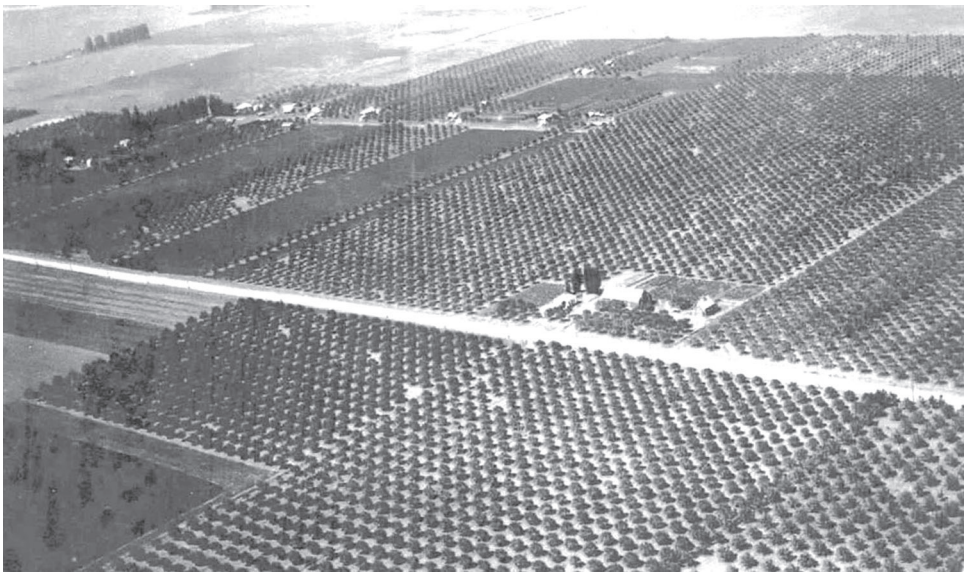
Charlie Bingaman, who was no relation to the Bingamans here now, came out in about 1910 from New York. They were quite wealthy people. They built the concrete warehouse here in about 1912 for apple storage. Charlie Bingaman and the banker, Walter Stringam, who was the president of the bank here in Imbler, probably financed it. The two of them built that storage shed, and that was the start of the apple industry here in Imbler.

One time we had a big apple crop. We had brought three or four thousand dollars worth of apple boxes from Bowman-Hicks but lost the crop. It wasn't worth ten cents a box.

I've hauled lots of apples out, thousands of boxes, but never did get anything for them. We couldn't sell them, though we shipped apples all over the United States. I finally found a broker in Waterloo, Iowa that was a real nice fellow; he did try to cheat you, but we stayed with him for a number of years.

I: How were the apple trees removed?

CF: The place I had down on Brooks Road, seventy acres, was in apples. I took most of that out of apples myself after I bought it. Back in those days we didn't have bulldozers and chainsaws. We



Portion of apple orchard 3/4 mile north of Imbler, owned by Clayton Fox in the 1930s and 40s
Photo courtesy of Clayton Fox

did it all with handsaws. To start with, we would come in with a big International tractor and a big heavy cable that we staked onto the top of the tree stump. After the limbs had been cut off for firewood, we used the International to pull it out. If we couldn't pull it one way, we'd unhook it and pull it the other. To take out the roots that broke off, we hooked onto those with a chain and used our small tractor to pull them out. We needed to get them out so we could plow. All that apple wood went for home fuel; it had kind of a good reputation for smoking meat. Some people in Elgin smoked lots of meat for farmers at that time.

Another little interesting story that I can tell you is about the Ruckmans. They were some of the big farmers south of Imbler, who hired men for the harvest crew. They had a big smokehouse and usually raised about ten or fifteen hogs for meat. One winter, somebody stole a lot of the ham and bacon out of the meat house. Ruckman never said a word about the theft to anybody. Sometime the next year at harvest time, one of the men who worked for him said, "That ham. Did you ever find out who stole your meat?" He said, "Yes I did. Just now."

I remember when I had one place with a nice crop of peas that I figured on for the down payment on another place. A came along and cleaned out the pea field. I had a tough time borrowing money and making a payment.

I: What year did the grass seed come in?

CF: The apples went out and then the grass seed came in the 1940s and late '50s.

The Beginning of Irrigation in Union County

I: When did you begin to irrigate?

CF: We still had apples when H. L. Wagner drilled the first irrigation well in the valley--probably fifty or sixty years ago. About twelve years later after Wagner drilled his well, Ted Sidor, who was our county agent, did lots of brainstorming with me about how to make some money here in the county. The county had been turned down for dams on the Grande Ronde River and Catherine Creek [near Union]. Ted and I worked out a deal where I furnished the ground and he got a manufacturing company in Chicago to bring a well-drilling rig out. The rig went to the Imperial Valley in California first for a fair; they didn't sell it there, so they came to Union County. We dug on my place. After a couple of weeks of drilling, they came up with a five-hundred-foot dry hole. The demonstration they planned had to be cancelled. We moved the rig from my place to the Cases at Alicel [between Island City and Imbler] and drilled an other dry hole five hundred feet deep. That was their limit and still no water. So that ended that.

The next year a junker rig came in from an oil field in Oklahoma. Those boys would drill just as long as they could hold the rig together with welding and baling wire. They drilled a new well on my place--just under fifteen hundred feet deep. So the farmers in between the Wagner well and my well thought, "There ought to be water in between."

That started the development of water wells here for the fanners. I would guess now we have probably thirty to fifty of

those deep wells that are irrigating. I think that the drilling of these wells, though I'll get some dispute on this statement, started things over in Umatilla County: the big circles [i.e., large sprinkler-irrigation systems that move in circles on wheels], with Columbia River water being pumped onto the farm ground. We found out we could raise our wheat yield from thirty to forty bushels an acre to a hundred or a hundred fifty bushels an acre. Our grass-seed harvest increased from four hundred to one or two thousand pounds an acre. These irrigation wells have really made agriculture in the Grande Ronde Valley.

Weed and Pest Control

I: What types of weed control do you have experience using?

CF: That's kind of an interesting thing because I was one the first farmers in the area to use weed control back in about the 1940s. In fact, I have a jar outside that is from the late '30s that contained probably the first two gallons of weed spray that came into the valley. Since that time I'd hate to guess how many millions of gallons have been used and how many thousands and maybe millions of dollars have been spent on weed spray.

The first sprayer we used had a ten-foot wide boom. We'd spray only a few little spots. The first ones we had were for small grass. It'd burn the little weeds, but it wouldn't burn the grass. Now there are so many new sprays and sprayers that it's hard to keep track of them; there are sprays for almost every kind of weed and sprayers with booms ninety feet across that can spray five hundred acres a day.

I: Before that, did you hand weed?

CF: We had to hand weed and hoe. The reason that I was one of the first to start on this spraying was the fact that we had a bigger sprayer that we used for apples.

I: What types of pest control have you used?

CF: That's kind of a funny one. When we started spraying the apples to keep them from being wormy, we used arsenate of lead. When that mixture fell out of favor, we used DDT; then they found problems with it. For fifty years, I sprayed apple trees three or four times a year to keep them from being wormy, and in 2002 it just didn't happen. I don't know why. We'll see what happens next year.

I: Do you think that's maybe because there is residue left in the apples?

CF: It could be. Could be that the winter weather killed the worms. I just don't know.

I: Describe the types of farm equipment you have experience using and the changes you saw occur.

CF: When I got out of college and came back to farm, first I had a team of horses—old plugs, not sparkplugs. They could hardly move around. Then I bought a small tractor. From that we've had almost every kind you can think of between 1940 and the present. Some were four-wheel tractors for different purposes. The biggest tractor I had would pull about four sixteen-inch bottom plows. Now you see larger tractors that have maybe ten or fifteen plows strung behind them.

The first $1,000 I ever made farming was on a little piece of ground near Summerville. I bought my first tractor with the $1,000 I made off the pea crop and by milking cows. I still have that tractor, now about sixty-five years old. It's in good shape, and it's been stored all the time. I may bring it out and see if the FHA students might want to work on it this fall.

Changes in Farm Equipment, Methods of Farming, and Animal Care

I: What changes have you seen in methods of planting and harvesting?

CF: Quite a change in that. We had just our flute-type drills; I think I started out with about an eight-foot-wide one. Then we went up to twelve, and now they pull two or three drills usually. Combines started out with one back in about the 1940s that had about a five-foot header on it. Now there are headers that are up to thirty feet wide. I never had more than two combines; now fellows who rent my ground have ten combines in the field at a time.

I: Do you think all these different advances have had a positive effect on the farming in the Union County area?

CF: It's changed the size of the farms drastically. I never farmed more than five hundred fifty acres; now a farm isn't considered a farm unless it has one to five or ten thousand acres.

I: Do you think that the environmental effects of spraying and modem conveniences are worth it?

CF: I don't really think it's made too much difference in the environment. We use lots of sprays. Lots of things change: the way we farm, the way we drive, and the places we go. Our fields looked terrible fifty years ago in comparison to what they look like now. It's just hard to believe. And our yields have changed a lot for the better.

I: What have been the main types of changes in animal care?

CF: One of the big changes in animal husbandry is the fact that we used to have to vaccinate lots of times. When we got our cattle up in the spring and the fall, we'd vaccinate them with four or five different vaccines; now those have been combined into one vaccine.

There have been some changes in medicines but not too much difference in the things that we had back fifty years ago and what we have now. The main thing would be the worming and fly control. One of our main problems for cattle that most people don't think of is pink eye. We've had several go blind from pink eye. The type of animals has changed greatly.

I: What was your favorite aspect of farming?

CF: I always liked the livestock and the sheep. I probably had some of the best sheepdogs in the state of Oregon. You could tell them to do almost anything, and they'd go out and do it for you. I stuck with the livestock for a good many years, though financially, I should have gone directly to farming out here in the valley instead of the cattle. I had purebred Herefords. I thought I probably had some of the best Herefords in the state of Oregon, cows with the best disposition, although that was my idea and not everybody else's.

Besides always liking livestock, I studied that field at Oregon State University. When I came back, I bought the place over at the foothill of Mt. Emily and for forty years I had sheep and purebred Hereford cattle on it. I gave the land to Oregon State University because our grass ground was making us more money than the livestock. So I concentrated on that more than I did on the livestock.

I was never afraid to work in my lifetime. In fact, I've probably handled more hay than almost anybody else around. I had my own grass cleaner, and we cleaned our own grass until they started bulking it instead of sacking it. My warehouse is fixed up for sheep in the basement. We used to store apples, and there was a grass-cleaning plant upstairs. We had one hole in the floor that everybody wondered about. I finally told someone that I would look through the hole to see if I had a ewe go down to lamb.

I: How many sheep and cattle did you have?

CF: The most sheep that I have ever had at a time was between a hundred to a hundred fifty. I cut it down to about fifty to seventy-five head of sheep and about forty to fifty head of cattle. At one time I milked about twenty head of cows.

Going to School in Imbler and La Grande

I: Describe attending grade school at Imbler.

CF: There were two or three of us whose folks had taught us to read and write before we started school—like the preschool classes now, but there wasn't anything like that then. We did first and second grade the same year, skipping the second grade year. There were two classes in each room, kind of like normal grade school. I could tell lots of stories about what we kids did, but those probably shouldn't be published.

I: Describe some of the high points you remember of grade school or high school.

Students (elementary and secondary) and teachers at Imbler School, ca. 1920
Hurley Stringham, William Westenskow, teachers
Photo courtesy of Clayton Fox

CF: I didn't go to high school here; I have to thank my folks for getting me to La Grande to high school. The first and second year I hitchhiked and bummed rides with people going to work. I had an old Model-A I drove the last year. I also had grandfolks that lived in La Grande, so if I didn't get a way home, I could stay in town with them.

By going to La Grande High School I was able to have algebra, geometry, trigonometry, and two or three terms of chemistry and physics. I don't believe I would have made it through Oregon State College if I hadn't had those extra classes, which weren't taught at Imbler because the high school wasn't big enough to have those classes.

I: You would consider it a high point just being able to learn?

CF: Yes, high school was pretty much like now, only we never heard of computers or TV sets. We studied Latin; that was different.

I: What do you remember about local sports when you were in school?

CF: They didn't have the transportation to travel between distant schools at that time. I think about the only teams that they played were Baker and Pendleton. In the high school we had intramural teams. Sports were so different back in 1929. Back in those times, I think they only had one football for the team to use for the whole game.

Imbler Fires and Fire Prevention

I: Describe one of the major fires that you can remember from the Imbler area.

CF: Probably the first fire that I have a picture of is the burning of the elevator, where they stored wheat and made flour in about 1910. My dad was the miller there. We were going to a potluck at the Legion Hall when someone mentioned that perhaps a hobo had gotten into the warehouse, set a fire, and slept there. But when the warehouse was cleaned out, a skeleton was never found. My father rebuilt the warehouse; it's now Wagner's seed warehouse.

The next fire I can remember is the grain elevator that burned; it was about the same as the elevator that's here in Imbler now, owned by Billy Howell. The apple houses along the railroad track next to it were burning. The elevator was full of wheat and caught fire under the eaves—higher than they could get any water to go. Three or four fellows went up in the top of the elevator to try to save it from burning; they had barrels of water and threw it out on the roof. One fellow tied himself by ropes and threw water out, but they couldn't put it out. So the elevator burned down. I remember the wheat sliding out from the big bins it was stored in; they had trucks hauling it out for feed and salvaging what the fire hadn't damaged. It was quite an operation.

Another fire in our warehouse burned

Imbler grain elevator fire, 1910
Photo by Ross Pinney & Mr. Alpin,
courtesy of Clayton Fox

seventy-five to a hundred thousand boxes of apples. Later, in preparation for a community potluck, someone asked my father to bring baked apples!

I: How old were you when the grain elevator burned down?

CF: I was probably in high school.

Probably the next big fire was the Blue Mountain fertilizer plant. When the fertilizer plant caught, they thought that perhaps the whole town would blow up. Charlie Richmond, the mayor, talked to the state fire marshal, who said everybody in Imbler should be evacuated. We went around to every house and took all the ladies and children over to the cemetery. The highways were closed both ways into town. The La Grande fire engine started to come out, but the state fire marshal ordered that it couldn't until they found whether anything would blow up; they didn't want to lose the big engine from La Grande. We had our little engine in Imbler patrol uptown, and, if there was an explosion, they could perhaps save some homes. Burr Courtright, who had the irrigation business in La Grande, had a load of irrigation pipe that was supposed to go to Butter Creek in Umatilla County. He called them up and got permission to use it at Imbler. We used those pipes to bring in water from my artesian well about a mile from town. We put a gas booster pump on it and had running water through a four-inch pipe. That experience showed the power of the artesian well we were irrigating from. We turned the water on, and it came without any electricity or pump.

I: Were there any other fires that you can remember?

CF: The other fire was the half block where the restaurant is. A large garage with a restaurant in it, the post office, the bank building, the Legion Hall, and the drugstore all burned. It was before we had any water in town; all the trucks that could hold water tried to put it out, but it was a hundred percent loss.

I: When the half block burned, how old were you?

CF: I was probably thirty or forty—back when I was farming.

I: How did the Rural Fire District begin?

CF: In about 1945, probably, we decided we needed fire protection in Imbler. So we bought a fire truck from donations. It was close to and during the Depression. I know of two people that had just fifty cents to donate to help buy the fire engine. I think my folks and I gave fifty or a hundred dollars.

The mayor and one of the councilmen first tried to buy a fire truck that was advertised in Portland at a used car lot, but it turned out to be pretty well obsolete. Then they bought a pickup from Goss Motors in La Grande and sent it to Boise to make a little fire truck. I think it held only three hundred gallons of water, but we also had a trailer loaded with water that would go out after the fire truck. It was very successful, even though we had only five or six hundred gallons of water. We only ran out of water at one fire, and that was when a high school boy got there early and turned it on full force, instead of using it sparingly.

So that's the way we started out.

Involvement in Government and Agricultural Policy

I: Were you ever involved in any kind of government?

CF: Yes. I have been involved quite a bit. Years ago, the Agricultural Service Committee was in charge of wheat and the livestock programs. I was chairman of that committee for a long time —twenty or thirty years. I was also involved in the committee to promote grass seed with some fellows in the Willamette Valley. At the time, the wheat league was the only one that was out promoting anything under an act of the legislature. We tried to get legislation to help our crops sell. That was quite a job. We finally decided to help Paul Rowell in the state's Department of Agriculture. That was about in the 1940s.

I: Was that to promote their crops?

CF: Yes. Potatoes and other seed crops.

I: Have you ever had any positions in local government?

CF: I was city secretary and the treasurer of Imbler for fifteen or twenty years.

I: What political issues do you remember as having a significant impact on the community?

CF: One was when the outlying school districts merged into the Imbler School District. That's been practically the only thing. Imbler's kept development down, so there haven't been many things here that have stirred up politics. Thinking back, one time we got $100 or $200 from the state car licensing bureau so we had a man from the oiling business in La Grande come out and oil a couple blocks for us. We'd be in debt for three years to pay him off for it. We'd pay so much each year when we got what money we could. He liked it and we definitely liked it. That's one reason that we've had practically all the streets in Imbler paved for probably more years than in most small towns.

Changes in Imbler

I: What are some of the changes you have observed in Imbler?

CF: At my foothill place, we didn't have any kind of power plant for electricity, so we had to milk ten or twelve cows by hand. In Imbler everybody had their own water-system pump. Electricity came to Imbler in about the '20s.

Another thing that has definitely changed is pasturing cows. Everybody in town had a fenced lot for their house and garden, and most people had a milk cow that they turned out; they usually came home. During the summer, we kept the calves at home; the calves' calling made the cows want to come home to their calves. If the grass got eaten down pretty short in town, we'd hire a boy with a horse to drive the cows out along the country roads, where they could eat.

Before we got telephones and computers, the Union Pacific trains had telegraph service. Instead of e-mail, we got a telegram. The old telephones worked with a crank.

I: What was the postal system like?

CF: We've had some of the best service in this community that you could ask for. We had mail delivered on Saturday, and we could go down and get our daily mail by 10:00 a.m.

I: Do you think the post office was more or less efficient than it is now?

CF: We had good service before because postal workers sorted mail to the different towns on the trains from Portland. The main difference is price. I have two-cent stamps and penny postcards left over; now a stamp costs thirty-seven cents.

Early Means of Travel

I; How did you travel from town to town when you were young?

CF: When I was in the early grades, we had a saddle horse or one of the work horses that we could put a saddle on. Then, my folks had an open-air Dodge that we drove to Salt Lake City a time or two. We bundled up in all the blankets we could roll around us. There were no highways; we went by back roads. In one muddy spot with a rail fence next it, people tore down pieces of the rail fence to put under their cars in order to get through.

I remember the first Model-A car that I saw come into Imbler, owned by Charlie Cleaver. I was in high school--1931 or so. The lines on that Model-A car! It was fantastic! When I was in college, I had one just about like it. Another car of that time was the Velie; we had one. I doubt if you've ever heard of that make of car. It was a whing-dinger.

I: How did you get around in the winter?

CF: The roads that went east-west drifted so full of snow that they opened them up with snowplows or bulldozers. The wind often came up and filled the roads back in, so ten hours later they'd have to do it again. They got in the habit of going out in the fields with 'dozers or snow plows and making three rows. The snow filled in there before it got to the main road; that way they could plow the road and then leave it alone for a few days.

We had only two-wheel-drive pickups. Later, when I took to farming, I had two four-wheel drives. One bad winter we had to chain up on all four to tear through. We used to get out to take care of our livestock. I've really seen quite a change in the way things are done.

I: Can you describe public transportation as it was?

Dodge touring car that was the Fox family car, 1920s; Clayton's father, mother, and sister in front seat; Fred and Vera Fox in back; Nora Fox, Clayton's aunt from Missoui, standing
Photo courtesy of Clayton Fox

CF: For years a daily train ran from La Grande to Joseph and back. People could get off the train in the canyon to fish. When the train came back that evening, the engineer started tooting every now and then along the river where they might be. The fisherman came running up, got on, and came home.

A bus also ran through to Wallowa County and back every day.

Churches and Community Life

I: Describe local churches and their effect on this community.

CF: The Imbler district used to be a strong Mormon community, but very few Mormons live in Imbler now. The two churches that we used to have were the Mormon, which was located in the music building at the school now, and the Methodist, in the old church on the south end of town. Both of those are gone now. The only church we have is the Christian Church in the center of town; I probably gave the first $1,000 donation to help build that church. I think it's a great little thing because on Sunday you'll see more cars at the Imbler church than you'll probably see in front of the larger churches in La Grande. I probably should say the same for the Baptist Church over at Summerville. They have great folks as their ministers, and they're doing a great job for the communities, I'd say.

Train depot in Imbler for Joseph branch line of Union Pacific Railroad with passenger service between La Grande and Joseph
Photo courtesy of Clayton Fox

I: When there were only two, did that cause a division in the community?

CF: No. The Mormon Church had lots of activities for their young folks like they still do, and it didn't matter whether you were a Mormon or not. All of us kids figured, if they were having something up there Thursday night, we all went up to it. There was nothing competitive between the churches.

I: Did you attend church as a child?

CF: Yes, at the Methodist Church. Mrs. VanBlokland was the minister part of the time there; I have a bit of the Bible she gave me when before I was eleven years old. We have tried a time or two to re-store the old church. Now I don't go to church; I try to be good enough with out having to go to church.

I: What do you remember about the community as a child?

CF: The Legion Hall used to be the center of everyone' s enjoyment. People from the whole town went there on a Saturday night for basketball or dances held there, and there were seats so that we could show a movie. I've been here in Imbler all my life and I can barely remember those things.

I: Do you feel that the Imbler community has a strong sense of community?

CF: Not as much as a lot of districts. In the early years, before there were cars, radios, and TVs, the town was quite

close. As this town has developed and changed, people here have changed, too. There are quite a few rental houses, and people in them come and go after a few years. When I go into the post office to get my mail, I very seldom see anybody that I really know. It used to be you could turn around and know everybody in Imbler. I haven't stayed close to the schools and the things that would probably bring me closer to the community.

Other Life-shaping Events

I: What else about your life would you like to tell?

CF: I had a sister who died at age sixty-three. She was never able to walk because of a birth defect—no join be tween the upper and lower torso. Our father carried her to the Imbler School for her eight grades. She made her way around the house in a wheelchair, perfect in mind and thoughts.

Any success I've had in my life could be accounted about as follows. An orphan lamb as a gift started me to be a farmer in the future and a career in 4-H, where in 1938 I was selected one of the four 4-H top members in the U.S. Next, my folks insisted I go to La Grande High School, where I could take several math and science classes. Without these, I don't believe I could have passed four years at Oregon State College. I spent three years taking care of the college's flock of sheep, earning a room at the rate of twenty-five cents per hour, thirty cents in my senior year. My education at OSU and the people I came in contact with added greatly to my career and life on the farm.

I didn't marry till I was seventy and then to Loree Buckingham Bierly, who, with her family, I knew back in 4-H and college days. After retirement, we have traveled three times to the Orient, Europe, Britain, Africa, Alaska, New Foundland, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as the Panama Canal and Costa Rica. We have visited New York, Boston, Washington, D.C., Atlanta, New Orleans, and Chicago.

Loree has always kept lots of flowers in our yard for people to see as they drive through Imbler. One farmer mentioned to me that Loree surely was a great asset to the Imbler community. Enough said.

Imbler Ladies' Aid, ca. 1913
Photo courtesy of Clayton Fox

Other Historic Imbler Photos

Courtesy of Clayton Fox

4-H project, Pacific International Livestock Show, 1934-36 (?), Portland

Photo courtesy of Clayton Fox

Sheep judging

Photo courtesy of Clayton Fox

Imbler Boy Scout baseball team, ca. 1926

Photo courtesy of Clayton Fox

IMBLER / ALICEL } OREGON, Sept 25th 1909

M C. Dr. Fox

Imbler Or.

IN ACCOUNT WITH

Imbler Mercantile and Stock Co.

(INCORPORATED)

GENERAL MERCHANDISE

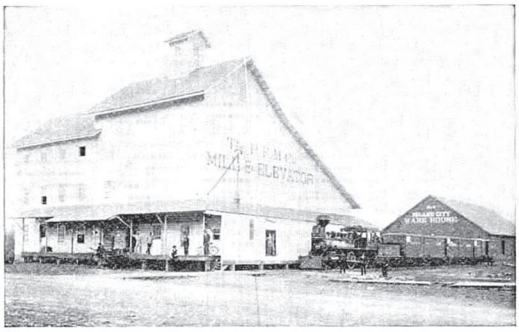
WE BUY AND SELL FARM PRODUCTS

RYDER BROS., PRINTERS, STATIONERS AND OFFICE SUPPLIES, BAKER CITY

DATE			DEBITS	CREDITS
Sep	25	To Butter 60 Macaroni 25 Cheese 15	80	
"	29	" Pants 400	400	
Oct	1	To Butter 60 Cloves 05 cinnamon 05	70	
"	3	" Walnuts 10 chocolate 30	45	
"	4	By Cash		400
"	11	To Butter 60	60	
"	16	" Beans 50 Butter 60	110	
"	19	" Pants 400	400	
"	19	" Crackers 25 (24) Butter 60 celery 20	105	
			1270	400
"	30	By Cash		870
		Balanced	1270	1270
"	29	To Salt 10 Matches 02	12	1
Jan	15	" crackers 20 Co coconut 10 Raisins 10	30	
"	15	" Currants 10 Bonami 10	20	
"	15	" chocolate 30 Walnuts 10	45	
"	29	" Oil 25	25	
Feb	1	Brought For.	330	
"	1	To Balance	490	
"	2	By Cash		490
		Balanced	490	490
Feb	19	To Beans 25 (24) Soap 25 Oil 25	75	
"	26	" 2 cans corn 25	25	
"	28	" Currants 15 Raisins 15 Baking 70	30	
"	28	By Cash		130
		Balanced	130	130

Page from account book of Imbler Mercantile and Stock Co. for Clayton's father, September, 1909

Original courtesy of Clayton Fox



Island City, Oregon, ... *1903*

M .....

In Account with

Pioneer Flouring Mill Co.

Proprietors of

Island City Roller Mills,

Dealers in

All kinds of grain, and manufacturers of flour, graham germea, whole wheat flour, corn meal, mill feed.

Our Brands:

Imperial Patent, White Rose, Thistle, Reliance, Purity

Blank receipt from Pioneer Flouring Mill Co., Island City, 1903

Original courtesy of Clayton Fox

Guided Tour of Imbler Homes & Businesses, 2003 Guide: Clayton Fox

Photos by Eugene Smith

Old church in Imbler, abandoned for several years, which was undergoing restoration in 2004. It originally stood on a site near Alicel.

One of the currently most popular churches in the valley, the Christian church is located on a site formerly occupied successively by a butcher shop, a barber shop, and a tavern. It has been built over several times. In the parking lot at the left, from about the 1920s, were a general store, an ice cream parlor, and a telephone office.

This market building dates from the early 1900s and is currently one of the more popular stores in the valley. In addition to serving as a general store for many years, it has usually housed the Imbler post office.

Originally this building was used for apple storage, but a fire destroyed it when it contained nearly 90,000 boxes of apples. Clayton's father used insurance to rebuild. It is now used by the grandson of H.L. Wagner, the man who started the grass-seed industry in the Grande Ronde Valley.

A Mr. Skillings built the Valley Iron Works in the late 1800s. Starting out as a wooden blacksmith shop, it has had many owners, all engaged in some kind of metal work, such as repair of farm machinery.

During much of the twentieth century this building, owned by Ben Jordan, was the supply source of bulk gasoline for farmers and as storage space for equipment and hay.

Blue Mountain Seeds is Imbler's history-making place for grass seed. Previously it had been a loose storage site for fertilizer. A severe fire, which threatened explosion, was controlled with water from the artesian well on Clayton's farm.

The co-op grain elevator also suffered fire damage in early 20th century when a nearby apple-storage building caught on fire. Clayon's father worked in a nearby building. Barrels of water were kept in the top story in case of fire, but that supply wasn't adequate to put out the fire. Piles of wheat, some of it roasted, spilled out on the ground. Insurance rebuilt the elevator.

Clyde Kiddle of the Island City flouring mill erected this building to serve as a general merchandise store. The second floor was for several years used by the Knights of Pythias as their lodge meeting place. The basement has served as potato storage and as a place for making a special kind of tooth powder--never a successful business venture.

Probably the nicest of the older homes in Imbler, this house has been occupied by Mr. Long--who was in charge of the bank--by the mayor of Imbler, and by Dick Hibberd, who claims to have been born in the house.

About one hundred ascres of the land in the center foreground belong to Clayton; men who farm on the share presently rent the land. Mt. Harris, one of the three most prominent peaks of the mountains which surround the Grand Ronde Valley, is at center. In the early days of television, someone detected a strong signal from a spot on Mt. Harris; an antenna erected there provided the best TV reception from Spokane of anywhere in the valley. Ben Robinson, one of the valley's top farmers, formerly owned the land occupied by the red barn.

Index

Symbols

A

B

C

D

E

F

G

H

I

J

K

L

M

N

O

P

R

S

T

U

V

W

Y