

Fredarica Johnson.

### **The Early Years**

FJ: My name is Fredarica Taal Johnson and I was born on October 4, 1910.

I: Have you always lived around La Grande?

FJ: Yes, I was gone once for three months once to Pendleton, but the rest of the time I have lived in Union County.

I: Where did you first start school?

FJ: We had a teacher who came to the ranch and we had private lessons.

I: How many students were there at the ranch?

FJ: There was Marjorie Tonget, Lester, Winnie, Edith (my sister) and myself. There needed to be at least four children for a teacher to come to the house. We lived up Route 244 off the Starkey Road.

I: How many years did this happen?

FJ: Until I was in second grade and then we moved to a school at Hilgard. The folks had bought a little house in Hilgard and we lived there. Then we moved to Grandma and Grandpa Taal's, where the city services are now. They had the swimming pool, Crystal Plunge.

I: What grade were you in when you moved to town?

FJ: I was in the third grade. We moved again to Uncle Garet's and we went to the Fruitdale school where Derek Huffman was my teacher.

I: Garet's ranch was up Owsley Canyon?

FJ: Yes and the Shaw's own it now. It was the last place you could see in the canyon. The house was torn down and moved up here in Old Town someplace where it was put back up again.

I: After the Fruitdale school, where did you go?

FJ: We went to Greenwood. I graduated from the eighth grade at Greenwood School. I then went on to the high school and graduated when I was eighteen in 1928 or so.

I: What do you remember most about those days?

FJ: The funniest thing that I remember that happened was when Les Kaffert, Johnny Group and another boy, Dale Charleston all were going to the Pendleton Round-Up. Dale's aunt and uncle lived right on the corner of Second and Jefferson and they raised Dale. It was Round-Up time in Pendleton, and it was no fair being in school. When noon came here's the train going out of here to Pendleton and those boys were going to the Round-Up. But Mrs. Rhodes decided they weren't going. Les Kaffert took a hold of that old lady, shook her, pushed her out of the way and all three of those boys went to the Round-Up. I'll never forget that. Every time I used to go to the store and see Les, we would both laugh about it.

I: They hitched a ride on the train?

FJ: No, they had their tickets.

I: Did you have any particular friends while you were going to school?

FJ: At the grade school we didn't because we lived too far out at Uncle Garet's place on weekends. Marjorie Condent and her folks lived here in town. Marjorie and Rossie were such good friends; I would go sometimes with her to Rossie's.

There was another girl that was an awfully good friend of Marjorie and Rossie's, Gwendolyn Buchanan. She lived up there off of Fourth Street near the hospital.

I: After you graduated from high school and got your diploma what were you going to do with your life?

FJ: First I was working waiting tables, at a café near where Graham's Drugstore was. They had an ice cream counter there where I worked. At the time I was staying with my Aunt Nels who lived where Alice Barker used to be, near where we take our cans and stuff for recycling. It was right next to the railroad track and there was a big apple plant where they made cider and vinegar. I worked there.

I: Was that out where the old flour mill was?

FJ: Yes, up Willow Street on the corner across from the railroad.

I: How did you meet your husband Oscar?

FJ: By the time the Mt. Emily Lumber Company came to Starkey my brother Lester got work there and he got acquainted with my husband. They'd come on into town and down to Aunt Nels. We'd all go to the show and dances. That's where I met my husband. Then I left and went up to Pendleton where I was for three months. We got married and moved back to the Mt. Emily Camp in September of 1934 and I went to work there.

I: What did your husband do at the Mt. Emily camp?

FJ: There was a survey crew for all these roads they were building and he was the head chain man.

I: They used a chain and rod when they're marking trees.

FJ: It was in the winter months, very hard times, and they had to shut down that part. They put him on a loader, loading logs out on decks right there at the river camp where we lived. Then he had an accident, he was jerked off the end of the train and he lost his leg. He was down here for six months in the hospital. About a year later he was able to go to work again and he worked as a mechanic at Starkey. He and I ran that river camp truck barn.

I: When he was injured he was told he would have a job for the rest of his life.

FJ: Yes, but that didn't happen. August Stange sold the mill and he was terminated.

I: How often did he have to go to Portland to have his leg worked on?

FJ: We averaged about once a month, sometimes we had to go for a couple of months. His leg was so short, he had to wear these special lamb's wool socks. The foot festered a great deal. We had to keep going down to Portland where the doctors were working on his leg socket.

I: With Bruce Morehead up at the camp, was he a lot of help to the residents who lived there?

FJ: He was very, very nice to me because I worked at the cookhouse. At the time that Oscar lost his leg it was the saddest mess I ever was in. I'd only been out of Grande Ronde Hospital myself three days with a major surgery. They came to tell me that Oscar had gotten hurt while I was at the river camp headquarters. That's where we lived, right across the tracks there was a little house where the Baptist church is with a cookhouse. They came and got me and when I crawled in that caboose, they had to take him from where he had gotten hurt to Beaver Creek bridge on the Grande Ronde River to load him into an ambulance. I tell you, I was so numb that I couldn't even get into that caboose. They just picked me up and put me in there. Oscar said, "When we get to the hospital, honey, get the best doctors you can get." He was bleeding terribly.

### **Moving to La Grande**

I: You moved to La Grande after the accident?

FJ: We paid six thousand five hundred dollars for this house and these two lots and then two lots back there on Alder Street. The house was so dirty we had to clean it up; with both of us having been laid up, it was awful. Oscar had a man that was helping him move another load down from the camp and I got in and washed down this kitchen, cleaned the bathroom so we could use them.

We were sitting here eating our supper and the phone rang. It was Della Olderman, and she wanted to know if I'd come to work. I said, "Gosh, we're not even settled." She said, "Well, we need help badly." So I went to work there (?) and worked for five years. Oscar went to work for Lynch Motor Company. He didn't really like working there with the public always looking at him and his short leg. He then got a job at Cream Supply in Island City. He worked there and old George Royse took work in there. George then he hired Oscar out from under Dick Blues, But things got kind of bad out there, what with the market and that relationship got dissolved. He then got on at Terry Trailer's and worked there for six years until they retired him at sixty-five.

Right after my mother died, I worked at the hospital but I didn't like that, I couldn't stand seeing people die and stuff like that. Then I went to work at the Greenwell Motel, managing the motel and supervising the employees. I worked there until I was sixty-five.

I: In your experiences of La Grande didn't you find that people tried to help on another?

FJ: When Oscar had that accident early that morning, by evening, the Grande Ronde Hospital was plum full of visitors. There was only man who didn't come to see Oscar Johnson, and that was the engineer on that train who was at fault for jerking Oscar off the end of that car. He had jerked him off the end of the car when he was switching the cars. At the time Oscar had to have extra units of blood. Dr. Branner who was such a nice man, came to the room where I was and he said, "Fredarica, we're going to have to have blood." I'll never forget this, he said, "There's a little Negro lady out there offering to give Oscar blood." I said, "Fine and dandy." That little woman came twice and gave blood. She was the nicest little woman that you could know.

I: Do you remember her name?

FJ: I thought her name was Coleman. Later when I was working at the hospital I always thought of her. She was a patient up there and she was just as sweet as she could be.

I: Sometimes this race situation isn't as bad as some people make out.

FJ: I had awfully good friends, Indians, Swedes, Negroes.

I: When you were growing up did you know much about the Chinese who lived here?

- FJ: The only thing I knew about them is when they had that camp down there below the Condet place, near those little gravel piles along there. I remember they're awfully nice to my parents. My mama sold them eggs, butter and cream. They were always sending us kids stuff, cookies and sweets. They were nice people.
- I: I interviewed Lane Montgomery recently up at Enterprise and she's just about your age. She graduated in 1929. She told me about how they had taken care of the Chinaman that used to sell vegetables from his cart.
- FJ: They lived up there where the Safeway store is now where the old La Grande Hotel was. On the corner of Fourth Street clear to the railroad tracks, on this side of the street, there was nothing but Chinese people.
- You know how kids are, curiosity kills the cat. When we'd come from high school, instead minding our business coming down Second Street and going home, we had to go down and walk down by the Chinese houses and then go over the viaduct.
- I: Did you ever go into China Mary's and have noodles?
- FJ: Yes, we'd eat there many a time. I even got a little bowl from China Mary's. Gene Barber stole that off of China Mary's table; we'd all been down one Saturday night and when we got home to camp, old Gene reached in his coat pocket and he handed me this little cup. That was where we always ganged up, either at Carl Baum's or at the noodle parlor.
- I: Carl Baum had a little beer tavern there on the corner of Depot and Jefferson. He had the best hamburgers.
- FJ: I'll tell you that man could put out a sandwich.
- I: Do you remember about when the Chinese had their problems and the Chinaman was shot on the post office steps?
- FJ: No I didn't know anything about that. I imagine that my parents would have known, but us kids we didn't know anything like that living up there at the ranch.
- I: Was it your uncle Garet Taal who built the swimming pool?
- FJ: He did. Marjorie Condet and her fiancé, I can't remember his name, but he was an electrician and he got electrocuted in that pool. They went ahead and got the pool open, but it didn't last very long; just too many government rules and regulations.
- I: Marjorie later married a fellow by the name of Ebert.
- FJ: Yes, Carl Ebert.
- I: Carl Ebert who was a painter.
- FJ: Aunt Maria and Uncle Bill were living up there on Second Street and he was with the city manager Bill Condet.
- I: I remember when Bill was a commissioner.
- FJ: Other than that I don't remember anything about the Chinese, only us kids walking by there.

I: I remember when your brother Wesley and then Bill Talbot went down for their physicals. Bill was alright until they noticed that he didn't have any thumb on his left hand; it had been cut off clear, so they disqualified him.

FJ: Oscar was still working at Mt Emily camp. He wasn't drafted due to his short leg. They called him in but when they saw that he was crippled, they rejected him. They didn't draft Wesley because they found out he was working on the train. They didn't draft Lester because he was with Western Equipment, and they didn't draft Donald because he was on the railroad.

I: Now when you were a girl what were some of the shops that you liked to shop in downtown?

FJ: Woolsworth was right close to Penney's, that was the best store we ever had! You could get most anything you wanted there. Our family didn't shop much with six kids. But when I did, I've always shopped at Penney's. I like Penney's myself, I am always satisfied with their merchandise.

I: It's always good quality for the money.

FJ: Now if I go shopping, I go to Bi-Mart to buy surplus there, like odds and ends of stuff you need. I hardly ever go to Wal-Mart, it's clear out on the road in Island City. I tell my nephew Arlin, by the time you go there, find a place to park, walk to the store, and walk ten miles back to your car, I'm ready to come home.

Arlin's sister, Donna Hudson, she shops there a lot and she says "Aunt Freda why don't you go to Wal-Mart?" One day I just up and told her, "Well you know Donna, we don't buy a lot of stuff and when I do I want good stuff."

I: Where do you usually buy your medicine?

FJ: Safeway, that's the cheapest place. I just went there the day before yesterday and paid sixty-eight dollars for three little bottles of pills. I got one bottle costs about pretty near ninety dollars.

I: Arlin's your nephew and he's good to you.

FJ: He's the only son I've ever had. He used to come and stay with us when he was little.

Arlin and I were talking the other day, we went out for a nice ride, dinner and then came home. I said to him coming home, "You know Arlin, Aunt Freda misses Oscar. But I miss your dad, Lester worse." That sounds odd, but I do. Lester was here just like Arlin, two or three times a day. Maybe it's four o'clock in the morning and we're in the pick-up a-going someplace fishing or something.

Arlin didn't have much home life. When he first started coming here after his dad died, and he came quite often because he knew that Lester used to come every day, I would say, "Arlin, you don't need to do that, honey." "Yes," he says, "I do, and Fredy, I'll never forget what you and uncle done for us kids."

If we go out to eat, he will say, "I'm paying; I'm making twice as much as you're making."

### **The Circus**

I: Going back to when you were a child, did you ever go to the circus when it came to town?

FJ: Every time it came. Pop would get the team of horses with a two-seater buggy type thing. He'd get the horses out and we would park them in the barn over at where Grandma and Grandpa lived by the viaduct. They had a barn with cow and everything there.

I: Where was the circus at that time?

FJ: It's a dim memory. You know where Cass's Tavern used to be, out there on highway 82? Back behind the tavern out in the fields there, there's an Indian fort. When I was a little kid, I remember it so plain. There was a little Indian fort over in that field and it seemed to me that that was where the circus was.

I am trying to recall that somewhere down in that area, where the old Safeway Store was, was where they had the circus when it came to town. Aunt Nina, Mama's youngest sister met her husband at the circus. He was a young guy from Chicago and was traveling around with this circus. Boy, the Swifles didn't like that; the Swifles were always better than the rest of us and they just raised heck! But Aunt Nina married him anyhow and moved to Portland.

I: I remember your mother's sister was married to Nate Swifle.

They didn't always come up to my folks every weekend for a big dinner. Wesley and I were talking the other day here. He came and she (?) was getting her hair done. I said "Wesley, how in the name of God did you make it?" Six kids and we always had good clothes, plenty to eat -- we had our own butter, eggs and meat. He'd come to get flour, sugar and stuff like that in town. You didn't need much.

I: I know Homer Lethel told me that the county fair was held out where Del Monte is off of Highway 82, out there by the railroad intersection on the other side of the underpass.

FJ: Another thing that I think is kind of interesting was the swinging bridge they had over the river, where the Dale Rynearson ranch is out on Blackhawk Trail.

Dale Rynearson was married to my dad's sister, Ella. Then there was a John Rynearson, a bachelor, who lived with them. If you were to go down Fourth Street where the older Safeway was, and walk across the river, you would arrive at Aunt Ella's house. Right there, they had a swinging bridge across the river. John was on that bridge one time, and it got to swinging so much, he went into the river and drowned right there.

Papa told us kids about that.

I: They used to have a bridge across the railroad tracks there by the freight house where it went up and over the railroad main lines.

FJ: Us kids used to go there and boy we got our butts beat for going there. We used to go down there just for fun and go in the railroad yard and then walk up over that trestle thing. Finally, they removed all of that, the roundhouse and everything.

Poppa's brother-in-law, Uncle Wes Harrison, worked on the roundhouse. He was the one who blew the whistles. My sister's husband was Gene Rochester and his Uncles Cecil (Mama's sister Freda married him) and Bill Wilson worked at the Roundhouse. Uncle Cecil somehow got ground up in the turntable when they were putting engines down those bays at the Roundhouse.

I: Well, it was an interesting time. We went through a depression growing up.

FJ: When we lived at Hilgard we lived close to where the cemetery was. You go through Hilgard and come to Five Points Creek where the Cantrells lived. Just about the last house before you start up toward Cantrell's, there's a road takes off to the right and goes up on up that hill. That's where the cemetery is. We lived in a little house right at the bottom of the hill from that cemetery. It's still there and the schoolhouse is right next door to it.

I: What kind of work did your father do when you lived up there?

FJ: He was running the ranch most of the time. When we lived over that at the viaduct, he worked at ?? He wasn't too well a man if I remember correctly. He was an awful little, bitty man. He wasn't as big as Arlin. They had a cow there, Old Daisy, chickens and beautiful gardens with lots of flowers. There was also a great big lilac tree. It was a beautiful thing and it was called a 'furnishing lilac'. It was there for a long, long time before city took it out. There used to be a city dump right where the city shops are now.

I: I knew that they had a dump down by the river.

FJ: Us kids used to go over there and play around on that dump. In the wintertime, living so close to the tracks and those cars being bussed around, coal fell out of the cars. Heck, us kids went out there with a gunny sacks and picked up coal; we always had enough coal for winter.

I: What are the biggest changes that you've seen in La Grande.

FJ: The biggest change that I've seen in La Grande that disappoint me is when they moved Safeway store from 4<sup>th</sup> and Adams way down south on Adams. I bought all my groceries from there and it was close.

The next biggest change that I've always griped about was that old Catholic hospital up there, if it was not good enough for a hospital, why did they condemn it and build this great big new one up on the side of the mountain?

I: Well, that isn't exactly what happened. What happened is that they ran out of sisters to run the Catholic hospital.

FJ: They just can't get sisters anymore?

I: That's true. It sure made a difference when they took the old Grande Ronde Hospital and put it up where the new one is. But they hardly let you stay a day in the hospital.

FJ: Hardly. Arlin had me up there here a while back for my mammogram and he said, "Do you know where in the hell we're going?" I said, "No. We'll go in the front door and we'll go from there." When we got in there I walked over there to the pink lady, and asked her and she said, "It's right there." I looked over there in the corner and here's a little table and a woman sitting there and that was the office. That girl talked to me and I signed in. She told me just go down that hall to the x-ray department.

I: It was quite a big change for you when you moved from Mt. Emily camp into La Grande. All of a sudden you had bills to pay, like for water.

FJ: Up at the Mt Emily Camp we didn't have to pay for a fuel either, they furnished it for us along with our house. The way we got our house was due to the fact that Oscar had lost his leg and Mr. Stange and Mr. Kinkle gave it to us. When Oscar got well enough to get out of the hospital, it was a year before he could go to work. Mt. Emily Lumber Company moved that little house on the train down to the ranch and set near the gate there where you go up to Dean Stone's now. We lived there for a year. Then when he was able to go back to work, they moved it back down there about where Wesley lived on this end of the camp. They gave Oscar and I another house that was

closer to the cookhouse. When we moved to the river camp we traded that house for the one at the river camp. It's still there now. But that's the one they beat us out of. I told Oscar afterwards, we were both mad, that I wouldn't have lived there anyway; there wasn't anything there. With his condition what do we want to be there for?

I: Even your nephew Jimmy tried to keep that house up there above Abel's store and it kept being broke into.

FJ: I missed it when we moved here because when we were there we were the only ones and it was so quiet. The only time we had noise were when the trucks were going past. When we moved down here to La Grande, that white house on the corner was there where Mr. Belgium lived, and this little house was there and Ralf Coat's house. There were also Cherry's greenhouses over there on Adams and Walnut. There wasn't anything back here. I used to just walk right out up to the hospital and go to work.

I: They had Red Shutter Motel there.

FJ: Yes, that was there.

I: They haven't done anything with that lot.

FJ: No. They got in here a while back and cleaned it all up; they had a school kid in there cleaning it up. I said, "Arlin, I wonder what they're going to put there." There isn't much room to put anything coming in off that curve. Wesley said to me one day, "Why don't you walk over there to Burger King?" I said, "'Cause I'm afraid to." If I go out and just go across the street, there are no marks there for that crosswalk. So I have to walk on down to the corner where that house is on the corner on Oak and there's a crossing that's marked.

I: Do you remember when Loose came around that corner, hit the house there where the Stardust Motel is now, and knocked it off it's foundation?

FJ: Yes. I said, "Wesley, I'm afraid to walk over and cross there." I said, "I have to walk on down to the corner by that house and cross over there." It's getting too far for me to walk anymore, on account of my legs and my balance. I'm afraid to cross that street, afraid I'll get hit." Mrs. Houser, the lady that works in the bakery, she got hit out there. She got knocked down, but it didn't hurt her.

I: Isn't it strange that Hought's Twenty-Four Flavors is still there?

FJ: He's just too tight. He wants too much money. You know why he can't rent it, he doesn't have a restroom?

I could tell him something that I figured out one day. If I owned that place, it's got a two-stall garage there. I could rent that little ice cream parlor there and have it a little sandwich shop or whatever, and have a restroom right there in that other garage.

As you go in there, there's a door that goes out into their kitchen, and there's a restroom there, but they can't use that. That's the reason why he can't do anything with it, plus he wants too much money for the whole place. His wife Helen's always wanted to sell it.

I: It's been empty for a lot of years.

FJ: Charlotte, their daughter, she married McCoy. They've got a beautiful home up at Wallowa Lake, and we are going up there this weekend. We're going to see the Wally Thompsons. He was a



Arlin's conductor on the railroad. Wally's wife Janice got killed over in Huntington. She was a schoolteacher.

I: What did you think of the population change? Do you think La Grande has grown about the right size?

FJ: When you stop and think about it, I think sometimes that we got more people than they think we got. Every time you pick up the paper here's all these baby boomers and where are they going?

I: It's hard for the younger people to find jobs here. You either have the mill, the college, and the railroad has moved a lot of jobs out of this valley.

### **The Beaver Intake**

FJ: I've been here all my life and I never heard of anything only the Beaver Intake, but I read in the papers now, it's the La Grande Reservoir.

I: It was the watershed back fifty-some years ago when I worked for the city. The city wants to keep that water available in case the city ever needs it.

FJ: When I was sixteen or so, I walked up there to go camping. Ray Noyse was the head of the telephone office here. Ray and Lolita Noyse and another couple were up visiting at Starkey and were going to the Beaver Intake, fishing and camping and they invited me to go along. Mama and Papa let me go with them. They had a team and wagon and a tent. They went down to Condent's place and crossed that little bridge there, and went up that little road. That road will take you to the Young's place.

We went up that road. It took us all day to get to the intake and we stayed there a couple of nights and they fished in that lake. I thought, "Good night!"

I: That's where the city water came from. It was so cold in the old days.

FJ: It was good water.

I: It was good water before we got the wells.

FJ: Now is that road open all the time, or do you have to walk in?

I: They lock the gate. They opened it for a few days and then they locked the gate and you've got to walk up to the intake.

FJ: Quite a ways to walk, too far to catch just two fish.

We went past the Young's place and we came out on the ridge. It said in the paper the other night you could only catch two trout but all the brook trout you wanted.

I haven't been fishing much anymore, actually since Lester has been gone. We went every weekend sometimes twice a week. I like Grande Ronde Lake especially up there by Anthony Lake.

You go on this side of lake and go over there quite a ways, and there's a great big rock way over at the end of the lake where the spillway is. I was sitting on this big rock, had my pole and my basket and all my fishing gear. Lester was fishing out over here a little ways. We were catching awful nice fish. Pretty quick I caught a fish and I cast back out.

The next think I knew, here was Lester standing right there along beside of me. He said, "Are you alright?" I thought he'd lost his mind. I said, "Yes, I'm alright. What's the matter?" He said, "You keeled over backwards." I was sitting on that rock and I had on my little straw hat 'cause it was hot and I just went over backwards. I said, "I'm alright."

I never thought anything about it. He said, "Do you want to go home?" I said, "No, there isn't anything the matter with me. We're going to stay here 'til we get our fish."

When we got home he said, "I think you better go see the doctor." That night I went in to take my bath to get ready to go to bed, and I was washing and combing my hair. Here was this little knot on the back of my head where I had bumped it on that rock.

I went up to Dr. Fredrickson the next day and I think he thought I was nuts. He gave me a electrocardiograph and other tests, but he couldn't find a thing wrong. It must have been just a little blood clot or something trying to pass through.

- I: Did you ever fish on the Grande Ronde River down along side High Banks, on this side of Riverside Park?
- FJ: I never have fished down in La Grande area. The farthest I ever fished was just back of the ranch and over at the Condet's place.
- I: It was a nice place to grow up.
- FJ: In those days we had lots a company. There never was a weekend that Mama didn't have a whole house full, big dinners and stuff like that. Arlin and I was talking, coming down from Ukiah the other day. He said, "Just think of all those big picnics that they used to have at the ranch." They'd go over there in the grove by the cottonwoods. It was beautiful. The kids could play in the river and the Bartamouses and all of us got together and had great big dinners. People would come up from town. Now people don't do that.
- I: No, they don't, they hardly know their neighbors. Those were good times.
- FJ: They had a little reception for Jim and Arlene. Oscar had already passed away by then. Lester and I went to it and it was in the Union Hall down here on Adams. They had a little reception there and there were a lot of us there. Some of them mentioned that it would be nice if we had kind of a little reunion, had a picnic or something. Nobody seemed to be too interested; one family member said they didn't have time, so the idea was dropped and we never had anything.
- I: When you were in town did you ever go to the Zuber Hall to dances?
- FJ: Lots of them, we went there pretty near every time they had a dance. Every Saturday night when I stayed with Aunt Nels and Uncle Garet. I was going to school and lived with her. She had a stepson, Charlie Wilson, also lived with her. Aunt Freda got to go to all the dances and then either Uncle Garet or Charlie brought me home.