

Helen Butler edited

I: What is your full name and when were you born?

HB: My full name is Helen Marie Butler. I was born Helen Marie Manuel on February 18, 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri. I am 74 years old.

I: Did you have brothers and sisters?

HB: No, I was an only child.

I: What are some of your earliest recollections as a child?

HB: When I was a child, I lived with my aunt because my mother wasn't able to take care of me; she had to work. I lived with my aunt until my sophomore year in high school.

I: Do you remember some particularly happy times in your family?

HB: Yes, I remember in high school when I was on the cheerleading team, and I played in the band. Sometimes after a game, some of the band members came over to our house. We rolled the rugs up and danced. The band played music and we just had us a good time.

I: Where did you meet your husband?

HB: I met my first husband when we were in school together. I was eighteen when I got married and had my first child at nineteen.

Move to Union County

I: Helen when did you move to La Grande?

HB: I moved to La Grande in July 1956 with five kids.

I: Why did you move to La Grande?

HB: My husband had died and my mother lived here.

I: Tell me how your Mother found La Grande.

HB: During World War II, my mother worked for the government at Vanport, Oregon. They washed the cars on these big trains. She had met Velma Butler when she lived in St. Louis and had heard about this government job during the war.

There was the Vanport Flood in 1948. I heard about it when my first husband and I were at the picture show in St. Louis, *Gone with the Wind*. They had flashed on the screen, news about this huge flood. I told my husband, "That's where my mother is."

Well, the flood washed out everything, and when my mother called she said, "We're going to have to find a place to stay because everything is flooded out." She had lost everything but herself.

That December, I was married and was expecting a new baby. Velma and my mother came here to this little town because somebody told them, "Maybe if you go to La Grande, Oregon, you might find a place to live." At that time Velma wasn't married to Willie Butler.

I don't know whether it was Ester Wilfound who used to live here or it was the Lowes that told my mother about La Grande. I think maybe Velma was working with the Lowes in Vanport. I am not quite sure how Mother and Velma found out about La Grande, but you know how people talk and they probably heard something about this town and decided to move here.

At that time, Mother lived on Madison and Hemlock, on the corner, just across from the Van Patten's.

I: How did she support herself when she got here?

HB: Well, she got a job doing housework and then she got a job working at the La Grande Clinic as a cleaning lady. She stayed there for years until they changed hands.

I: Do you remember when you first arrived in La Grande?

HB: Yes, I do. In 1956, my mother came to visit me in St. Louis, Missouri where I was living at the time. My husband had died; we, me and the children, were having a hard time. Mother asked me if I wanted to go back with her. I said no because I already had a job and it didn't make much sense in going and leaving my job. She said, "No, don't leave your job, but come on a vacation." I got an arrangement with my employer and came on out here with her and my dad.

I: By train?

HB: No, in the car.

I: Did you have to look for work right away?

HB: I did, but I couldn't find a job; I had a little bit of money, so I wasn't on the street or really desperate. I had my five young kids with me, too.

HB: My mother did a lot of housework and I would work along with her when she did the La Grande Clinic. We used to clean the Tropicara -- the restaurant, bar and upstairs. After Mother left and went to Baker to live, I had the job of doing that building. Lou Carpenter, the owner of the building, had me clean in the kitchen, wash dishes at night. I used to clean the Nazarene Church. That's how I got my jobs; I did housework. I worked for Mrs. Strand for twenty-three years. I worked for Marion Baker, the secretary for the Union Pacific Railroad. I cleaned her and her mother's home.

I: How did these people treat you?

HB: Real nice. They were all white and they treated me well. I had more trouble with my own race. I don't know whether it was because I came here and worked myself up, but I had a lot of trouble.

I: What kind of trouble do you mean?

HB: Well, jealousy and hard feelings. I was doing something that they didn't like. It was like when you're working and get your place to stay, you start to buy little things you need for yourself, your home, and your children. They would say something like, "Oh, she got her a new car. Boy, she thinks she's rich!" It was little naggings.

I: Did you think they saw you as uppity, a little too removed or thought yourself better than they were?

HB: Well, I guess that's what it was, better than they were or something. It was kind of rough for me for a while; it wasn't with the white people, it was just with my own color. But I never was in any trouble or anything.

I: In your experience with the white people at the churches and whom you worked for, did you think that they had any trace of prejudice towards you?

HB: Everyone that I worked for treated me real nice, with hospitality. They really did.

I: Sometimes, though, you can feel as though when people treat you politely they're a little bit condescending, they really think they're better than you.

HB: When I lived in St. Louis, I lived around a lot of white people because my aunt lived in a white neighborhood. When I was growing up, we played with white kids and they would come over especially at dinnertime. They'd look in the screen door, just as we'd be getting ready to set down and eat. So Aunt Max said, "Come on, come on, come on in." They would come in and eat with us.

Sometimes we would have a little spat with the white kids and they would call us names. Two minutes later we would be back playing again. So I grew up around a lot of whites. In 1956 in St. Louis, whites and blacks were beginning to mix, begin to go to school together. My husband and I, after he got out of the Army, moved into the Projects and it was mixed whites and blacks. We played together, lived next door to each other; we got along real well.

I: It wasn't until the 1960, though, that the rules for segregation really started to crumble. Of course, there were civil rights demonstrations in the South. I'm sure you were hearing or reading about those.

HB: Yes. I remember. I was here in La Grande by then. It didn't dawn on me because it was very seldom you heard about all those goings on in the South. I wasn't connected to it any more, living in La Grande.

I: Did you have reactions to it?

HB: Well, I would turn on the radio and hear things; we didn't have a TV at that time. When I was growing up in St Louis during the late 40's and early 50's, there wasn't much going on in the city. But when that little boy got killed, his name was Greenly something, it stirred up a lot of resentment down South in Mississippi. It stirred up a lot of things and that's when Martin Luther King began talking and marching.

I: What was happening here in La Grande?

HB: Here the whites didn't show any remorse, they just went along everyday doing their own thing. The blacks here, they could tell what was happening, but we didn't do anything about it, we didn't want to cause any confusions or anything like that. In Portland there was a lot of concern and reactions to the Civil Rights Marches.

I: You had a number of children, can you tell me a little about them?

11 Children

HB: My first husband had died in St. Louis, leaving me with five children. After I got here, I married J.C. Hawthorne, Johnny Clayton Hawthorne.

I: Did you have more children?

HB: I had six boys with him.

I: My word! What about the first five children?

HB: The first five by Ilee Sr, stayed with me for a while, but they didn't like it here.

I: How old were they when they left?

HB: They were little tigers when they left to go back to St. Louis. It was pretty hard on me, but my aunt wrote and said she would keep all five kids.

I: How many years were you married to J.C. Hawthorne?

HB: We were married in '56, and I think we were married about fifteen years. But he left me when Johnny graduated from high school.

I: Is Johnny the oldest or the youngest?

HB: The oldest of the Hawthornes.

I: You still had five children to raise besides Johnny?

HB: Yes, five more after Johnny went off to college.

Greenwood School

I: When you were living on Madison didn't all of your children start at Greenwood School?

HB: Yes.

I: What were some of their reactions to the Greenwood school?

HB: I used to walk with them to Greenwood School because I didn't have a car. My husband J.C. was a logger and worked for Bates Lumber Company out in Elgin. I did most of the child raising; he was gone all the week and only came home on weekends.

I would get the kids up and take them to school. When Johnny went his first year, you know how little kids they'll cry, "Mama, Mama," he didn't want to go. I said, "Well, you got to go to school." He was school ready because I taught them before they began the first grade: first their ABCs, learning how to write, printing their letters, and learning how to count.

I: What were some of the things they told you about their days at school?

HB: Well, I asked them sometimes, "How was school today?" "Oh, it was alright." I asked, "Anything exciting happen?" "No." Then they start saying, "One little white boy, he did so-and-so-and-so." I replied, "Well, just go ahead and don't pay any attention."

I: Calling them names or fighting?

HB: Yes, they would call them black, or nigger. I would say, “Well, just don’t think anything like that.” So I had to go down to the school and talk with one of the teachers about it. Everything got quiet after that; everything was fine.

I: What did their teachers say?

HB: The teacher said, “Well, if a student did say that, we didn’t hear it” or something like that. “We’ll watch out for it again.”

I: Did you believe the teacher?

HB: I guess I did, because I didn’t want to get in any disagreements with the teachers or the school; I heard all of that before I even came to La Grande.

I: Did these kinds of stories continue over the years your kids were at Greenwood?

HB: No, no. At Greenwood they all liked the children. Now, I had trouble with Edward not learning, because he used to disrupt the class. I had to talk to him about how to act in the classroom and all that. He found his place after that and then everything was okay. They won a lot of trophies in their sports.

I: Is that when they got into high school?

HB: Before they went into high school, they were into Little League baseball and they were in Boy Scouts. I was Den Mother of the Scout group, had nine little boys and they were the only little black kids that were in Cub Scouts during that time.

I: How did you do to support all those children?

Working Life

HB: Those few house cleaning jobs weren’t bringing me in enough money. I decided I needed a job working somewhere that had benefits. One of my sons said “Mom, we’re getting ready to leave and we’re all going off in different directions. We are going to college and what you need is a job that is stable, and that whenever you retire you have benefits. This housework that you’re doing now has no retirement benefits.” I said, “Well, I think you’re right.”

Then I went up the high school and put in an application to work there. It was 1980.

I: Was Dale Wyatt there at that time?

HB: Yes, Dale Wyatt was there. My home teacher was a typist in one of the typing rooms. He said, "If you don't know how to write out an application I'll help you." I said I know how to write one out. So I sat there and got my application for the school, wrote it out. I put down everybody that I was working for at that time and handed it to the secretary. A week went by when the telephone rang, it was one of the secretaries. She said, "Helen, you better come down; they want to interview you."

I: Who interviewed you?

HB: Buz Wilton was there at that time. I went down and was interviewed by Buz, and he had Robert Sloan showed me around, told me what had to be done.

After the interview I came back home and said, "I don't have the job." I thought I didn't have the job. Then the telephone rang again, someone asked "What time are you able to come to work?" I said, "No!" It was a Thursday, so he said, "Let's wait till Monday." I took the kids out for dinner and boy, did we celebrate!

I: What did you tell your housekeeping clients, that you wouldn't be working for them anymore?

HB: They were so good but they said, "Since you don't have to work on Saturdays we can still have you work for us on Saturdays."

HB: I said, "Okay." I worked for the Sheldon and Alice Strand over twenty-some years, and I worked for Marianne Baker until she died.

I: You've worked a mighty hard and long time.

HB: Yes, it was hard, it was very, very hard. J.C. left me with six boys to raise and I had to do it all by myself.

I: Were you at all resentful about that?

HB: About raising the kids alone? It hurt, but then I got over it and went on. Really, you got to look to the future. You can't look behind you; you got to just keep on going.

I: Besides what you could earn through your own work, were there any other kinds of assistance you could get in La Grande as a single mother with so many children?

HB: There was welfare, but I didn't want to be on welfare.

I: There were other kinds of assistance you could have gotten.

HB: What kinds?

I: Various organizations sometimes provided whatever help a person in need required.

HB: Nobody came to me with anything.

I: Was there any help from your church?

HB: No, not from Boyd Memorial. I had to work for different white people in their homes.

I: What kind of wages did you make doing these kind of jobs?

HB: I made two dollars and fifty cents an hour when I first began.

I: How many hours a day did you work?

HB: From eight to three.

I: Five days a week?

HB: Five days a week and then I had janitorial jobs at different doctors' offices.

I: Did you work at more than one person's home during that eight to three?

HB: Sometimes I would work three hours here, three hours there, like that.

I: Did you have a car to get around?

HB: I walked.

I: You walked?

HB: I was living on Fir when I was working. I walked from Fir Avenue up to Modelaire Drive where I worked for Lesters, Deckers, and for a lot of ladies up there.

I: I suppose they supplied all the cleaning equipment.

HB: Oh yes.

I: Did you have the same work pattern everyday?

HB: About the same. Sometimes they wanted me to do this and then the next job they wanted me to do that.

I: I imagined you vacuumed the rugs.

HB: Yes.

I: Did you have to wash the toilet bowls and clean the sinks in the kitchen?

HB: Oh yes, I did all of that.

I: Did you wash dishes too?

HB: Oh yes, and did the ironing, took the garbage out, and mopped the floors, sometimes on my hands and knees. Then I worked up at the Grande Ronde Hospital up on Sunset Drive.

Being A Nurse's Aid

I: Where did you clean at the hospital?

HB: I didn't clean there, I was a nurses' aide; I was helping the sick patients.

I: Had you had training for that?

HB: Yes, I had it when I lived in St. Louis. The reason why I had to stop work then, was because I had to find someone to take care of my kids while I worked. But this way, I waited until the kids got into school and I would go on to work and then by the time they would be out of school I would be coming home.

I: What were some of your duties as nurses' aide?

HB: I would make beds even with the patient in it; you roll the patient over and then you took away the sheets from under them. Then you rolled them back over and made sure that the sides were up so that they wouldn't fall out. I did that type of work, take their temperatures and give them water. I worked from eleven at night to seven in the morning.

I: How did you sleep?

HB: After the children would go to school I would take a nap. Sometimes in between, I would go right quick and do housework. I had time to do housework before the kids would come home from school, then I'd be home to cook dinner. I don't know how I survived it, but I did it.

I: You must've slept only two or three hours at night.

HB: Yes, I did.

I: Was the hospital job better than the housecleaning jobs?

HB: Well, they were both about the same.

I: Was the pay better at the hospital?

HB: It was sixty cents an hour at the hospital and I got \$2.50 an hour for doing housework.

I: You would've been better off doing more housecleaning.

HB: Yes. I did the housecleaning because I had time during the day since I worked that night shift at the hospital.

I: That wasn't a lot of money for all that work.

HB: No, it wasn't.

I: Where were you spending the money?

HB: I would take out some, you know how women do, they have a little slot they put their money in; I would take out a little bit and save some. If the kids needed money for their school lunches, I think they were twenty-five cents then I would give each one a quarter. They stood in a line and I'd give them their money and they would be out the door. At that time there were two or three of them going to school, so that was seventy-five cents a day. I was working one, two, three, four jobs before I went to the hospital; that would give me enough money to pay my house rent and buy food. I also had a vegetable garden. I had greens, potatoes and carrots, things like that.

I: What'd you do in the winter?

HB: Along about August, I would can those vegetables and we would eat off of them in the wintertime.

I: I imagine your meals were fairly simple.

HB: Yes, sometimes we'd just have beans for dinner because anyone can raise beans.

I: Beans and nothing else?

HB: I grew beans, potatoes and lettuce and other vegetables.

I: Were you ever able to buy meat?

HB: Oh yes. I would buy some ham hocks to season the food, buy flour to make bread. If the kids were going to carry their lunches to school I bought lunch stuff.

I: Did you have any money for any kind of treats or desserts?

HB: I knew how to bake a cake and we had have ice cream sometimes.

I: When the kids got to be early teenage years did they have any jobs?

HB: Yes they did.

I: Did they contribute money to help run the house?

HB: Yes they did. When I was working at the Sacagawea Annex, cleaning the hallways and emptying the garbage with Ed Klef, I would make a hundred and ten dollars a month. I was at that job for two or three hours a day. When I got the job working up at the high school I said, "Yippee!" That meant more money.

I: What sort of a job was that?

HB: Custodial work, I was working at the administration building at the old high school. I was in there all by myself, and I cleaned that building from top to bottom. When I first started there, it was six hundred dollars a month.

I: Was that more money than you'd ever made before?

HB: Yes. But I kept those other jobs because I didn't have to be at the high school until three in the afternoon. I worked there from three to eleven-thirty at the administration building in the wintertime. In the summertime we had to be at work at six in the morning and we got off at three to come home.

I: Now that left the kids after school alone almost all the time.

HB: They were teenagers when I started working at the high school. When they were little, Mrs. Torrance sometimes took and kept them until I came home.

I: What did you tell the kids while you were at work?

HB: I'd tell them, "Now, you can look at TV, but no playing with matches. Don't let anybody in, I don't care who it is, because you don't know what people will do." I never had any trouble at all.

I: What about when they went out?

HB: They didn't go out because I would have a lady watch and see if they went out.

I: That's unusual for teenagers.

HB: Oh, I am talking about when they were little tots.

I: How about when they were older?

HB: When they were teenagers, they had sports after school. Verl Miller was the athletic director at that time and the wrestling coach, the oldest boys did wrestling. Three of them, Rodney, Linroe and Johnny all played in the band, actually in the symphony, jazz and marching bands.

I: Were they playing wind instruments?

HB: Yes.

I: Did they get all their instruction at school?

HB: Johnny played the saxophone, Linroe played the drums and Rodney played the trumpet. I played the piano at home sometimes with them, we had our own little musical concerts.

11 Children Went to College

I: Raising kids by yourself is not easy, especially with that many children. Didn't all of your children go to college?

HB: Yes.

I: How do you explain their determination to do that?

HB: Well, I believe it was their teachers and myself encouraging the children, telling them how important education is; telling them that if you don't graduate from high school you'll be out in the street or something. I started working at thirteen years old at a little restaurant across the street from where I lived in St. Louis. It was a black restaurant and I would just run across the street and work behind the counter.

I: However, even in La Grande the majority of kids who went to La Grande High School didn't want to go on to college. It's certainly unusual for eleven kids from one family to want to go on to college so there must've been other influences on them.

HB: I encouraged them and the teachers worked with them and encouraged them. Even their coaches worked with them.

I: Were they all telling them that they were smart enough to succeed in college?

HB: They were, and their dad was pretty smart too. Their father was class valedictorian. Clarence won the Heisman award and Linroe was on the honor roll.

I: Did he tell them that it was important to go on to college even though he hadn't?

HB: He did. He talked a little bit, but you know men, well, he was sort of crazy. He encouraged them, but I did the most of the encouraging; I used to tell them "that if you don't do something for yourself you'll never amount to anything."

I: Did any of them go to college here?

HB: No, Johnny went to Western Business College because he figured why go to college for four years and find out after you have graduated, that you have no job. He went and got a business and management degree; when he got out, he started working at Nordstroms in the shoe department. He lives in Boston, Massachusetts now because his job transferred him there. He's the president of Nordstroms in Boston, Massachusetts

HB: They were all pretty good athletes, wrestling and football. Johnny got a scholarship, Glenroll got a half scholarship, and Clarence got a scholarship as well as winning the Heisman Trophy for being the best football player of the year.

I: That was quite an honor. What are some of the professions that the kids have gone into?

HB: Josephine, she's not a Hawthorne but a Rines and she first worked in Los Angeles as a probation officer. Now she is working for the Attorney General's office, and lives in Santa Monica. Josephine is also in the Air Force Reserves. Mary works for the 7-Up bottling company in computers. But, now she's no longer with that service. Lindsey works for[?]

Albert he is a biology professor at the University of Missouri. I just got this last night (pointing to a letter). He signed it as the 'Professor'. Ilee Jr. is employed by the Veterans' Administration. He was in the Army for five years and then got a job working at the Veterans' Administration.

My boy Linroe lives in Portland; he graduated from Portland State University and he is a manager at UPS now. He got that job when he graduated from high

school; he needed a job to help him through his early years of college. Johnny got a job working at Nordstroms; he was just cleaning the store and he put his broom down because he told himself I can do better than this. He asked his manager if he could sell shoes in the store. The manager said, "Yes, you can, but you got to have a college education, Johnny." He went to Western Business College and graduated and got a job as a shoe salesman.

Later on he got so good so they put him as manager. He married a girl he met in Portland who was in the cosmetics department. They had a big wedding and the company moved him to Boston, Massachusetts. Now Johnny Hawthorne is president of the firm in Boston, Massachusetts. He's making the big bucks there. The children would've stayed here, but there's no money here.

I: Do you see the five children that went back to St. Louis often?

HB: All the time.

I: Did they all get to go to college?

HB: All of them.

I: Aren't you proud to have so many children all turning out so successful? You must have raised them with a rod of iron.

HB: I tried with lots of love and discipline. They saw their friends going through college too and I am sure that affected them. Going to church was a help to them, too. The preacher would encourage the kids. Nowadays, all these drugs and stuff it wasn't around then like it is now, thank goodness for that. They never were on drugs, none of them.

I: There were in earlier years, gangs of kids from different parts of La Grande. Did they ever get involved in any of the gangs?

HB: No. No, because when I felt like they were gone too long, I'd get to stepping out and walking around, because I knew just exactly where they would be. They would be down at the high school wrestling or doing whatever they supposed to be doing. Sometimes they had activities or classes after school and they would come home when it was over. They would go to school dances, go to the prom and different things at school.

I: How do you think they selected the colleges they wanted to go to?

HB: Well, I don't know how they did that.

I: Did you know much about the colleges they chose?

HB: No, I didn't. I knew about the one here, but they didn't want to stay here, "No, I don't want to go to Eastern Oregon." I guess the teachers had them look at their catalogues to see what college they would like to go to.

I: When one of them decided on a college away from La Grande, what kind of a discussion did you have with them about how they were going to finance the college?

HB: First of all, they always worked; I had them open up a savings account and I would tell them, "Now, don't touch it, because someday you'll have to use it. I don't care how bad you want the money, don't touch it. When you get your pay you go and put so much in each month until you graduate from high school." When they graduated from high school they had enough money.

I: They did?

HB: Yes. Clarence and Rodney went to Oregon State. James went to the University of Oregon. The other kids went back to St. Louis, to St. Louis University. All but two graduated from college.

Painting

I: What have you done outside of work and raising children, any painting or music?

HB: Well, I was in oil painting and Maxine Myers was the teacher. Some of the pictures that I finished, I gave them to some of my kids. They couldn't believe that Mommy had done them.

I: I know that you sing well, is that one of your favorite things to do? We sure enjoy hearing you in church.

HB: Yes, and I like tap dancing too. I remember we had a talent program up at the Stake Center in the gym and I tap danced. Everybody seemed to like it. After that, I went over to the high school in Union and I tap danced there. That's the farthest I went outside of La Grande.

Health Insurance

I: When the children were young and, before you had the second family, how did you get the health care assistance you needed, for instance, in childbirth? Did you go to the hospital?

HB: Oh yes. I went to the hospital each time and my husband had BlueCross insurance.

I: So you had full coverage for health care?

HB: Yes. We never went on welfare or anything like that.

I: I got that point very strongly.

HB: Yes.

I: When you went to the hospital as a patient rather than as an employee, how were you treated?

HB: Very good.

I: Nothing you would've improved?

HB: Everybody was very good.

I: Aside from going to the hospital for bearing children, I suppose you occasionally needed some medical assistance like going to a doctor's office?

HB: The insurance paid it, I had insurance before Hawthorne and I separated. When I had the job at the school, there were all kinds of benefits. It was very seldom that I went to the doctor; I stayed well all the time. I guess the Lord knew I didn't have anybody to take care of me. The kids, those big old boys, they weren't sickly; very seldom did they have to go to the doctors and when they did it was to the eye doctor.

I: Did you get a prescription for lenses?

HB: Yes, for eyeglasses. The health nurse stepped in and provided me with transportation to Portland for Linroe for eyeglasses. I got them with the help of the Elks.

I: Is that because your health policy didn't cover eyeglasses?

HB: No, I wasn't able to pay at that time for eyeglasses so the Elks helped with them.

I: I think they have a program like that.

HB: I remember having a whole lot of eyeglass frames that I would take it up Bob Wilkins. I would take them to him and he would turn them over to the Elks. After I started working at the high school I didn't have to worry when I got sick, because my ODS insurance would pay.

Now I'm getting railroad benefits, money from the school district and money from Social Security. I asked them over at Social Security, "Since I'm getting money from the railroad, is that going to interrupt with my Social Security?" She said, "No, that's yours because you worked for it."

Getting a Driver's License a Second Time

I: Do you drive, Helen?

HB: Yes, I do. I started driving before I retired.

I: How old were you when you finally got your driver's license?

HB: I was sixty-one when I got my first driver's license. One day I was going up to the church to get my 'temple recommend' and I didn't know I was driving on the left-hand side of the road. I was just a-going along. Someone said, "Move over." I kept going. They said it three times, and the fourth time it was a policeman coming right close to me. I thought, "What is this man doing?" Then I realized that I was over on the wrong side of the road and I whipped over quick.

I: Did you get a ticket?

HB: First the policeman turned around and came back. He kept behind me as I went on up to the Island City chapel. I arrived at the church and went inside to see the bishop to get my 'temple recommend'. When the bishop and I were talking somebody at the door said, "There's a good-looking man here to see you." I thought they were just playing. I said, "Now, that's embarrassing. I wonder who that could be?"

He came in and I looked down at his shoes and thought, "Oh gosh, it's the police." He asked me, "Helen, do you know what you just did?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Now what did you do?" I said, "I was driving on the wrong side of the street and it just came to me that I was on the wrong side of the street. I saw you coming towards me and I just ducked over and got back on the right side." That's all I could tell him, the exact truth. He said, "Well, I won't give you a ticket, but I advise you to take your driving license again." I said, "Okay, I will."

I went down to the DMV to take my driving test again. I had to learn all that stuff and it was hard. Oh, it was hard! My friends helped me: Dorothy Price and Sigrid Jones and a bunch of other people.

I said, "You know, this is a shame." One day I just kept at it and then I would go in and they would tell me to drive. I was either driving too slow or not fast enough. "Now you want me to drive fast. You get me for driving too fast and now I'm driving too slow." One day Sigrid was in the car with me and she said, "We're going out on Mt. Glen Road." I said, "Oh, no." The road went up the hill and it looked like my car was going up too steep, and I was just shaking. She said, "Don't put your foot on that pedal because if you do, boy, I'm going to take your foot off." I said, "No, no, no." She said, "Well, you scared."

Anyway, I was just so nervous. We finally got going. As long as it was nice, smooth and straight, I was okay. But when it started looking like it was going uphill and down, that is what got me scared.

I: Have you driven out of town?

HB: No, I drive right around here in town. I told the lady at the DMV, the only thing I needed my car for, was to go to church, to the store, to the doctor, or the hospital. She said, "Maybe we can do something about that. I want you to show me where you go." I prayed, I just prayed for a whole week. The next day when it was time for me to get my driving test I prayed and prayed and prayed. I asked for a blessing and I got a blessing. When I got in the car, I was as cool as a cucumber.

I said, "Lord, don't fail me, please don't fail me today!" I got in the car and the lady came out and said, "Now you take me where you generally go to the store." I drove to Safeway. Well, that was fine and she checked that off. Then I said, "Sometimes I go here to Albertsons." I drove to Albertsons. She checked that off. She said, "Now, what about going to your doctor?" I said "Well, I go and get my eyes checked." I drove right there and I parked. I said, "I go out here to Wal-Mart." She said, "Show me where you go to Wal-Mart." I drove and said, "Lord, don't fail me now!" I just drove off to Wal-Mart as easy as pie. "Now, what about your church?" I said, "That's right up here." I drove down to the church and parked.

I got my new driver's license!

Meeting Willie Butler

I: Tell me about your third and last husband, Willy. How you met him and, and a little bit about him.

HB: I met Willie Butler because my husband Hawthorne and he were good buddies. They went fishing together. I knew Velma (Willie's first wife) way before I met Willie. My mother knew Velma when she lived in St. Louis in the late 1940s.

Willie had been living in Omaha, Nebraska working for Union Pacific Railroad. They moved him to Baker and he stayed there a while. Some time in there, he met Velma and married her.

We would all go up to Wallowa Lake and fish, J.C., me, my mother, Willie and Velma, a whole bunch of us went go fishing.

I: How long after you had both lost your spouses did you start dating?

HB: Hawthorne walked off and left me to finished raising the children. I saw to it that they went through grade school, high school, and college. I'd say about twenty years, a long time, before I ever married again. When I married Willie I had retired from the La Grande High School.

I: How many years had it been since Willie lost Velma?

HB: Velma died in '89 so it was about three years.

I: Did Willie continue to work for the railroad?

HB: Yes, he was working for the railroad for about thirty-some years.

I: Did Willie have children?

HB: No, he never had any children.

I: I bet he enjoyed yours!

HB: Yes, he did! He'd seen them grow up as little tiny things in the neighborhood. He had lived in that neighborhood ever since they were babies.

[when did Willie die?]

I: Were you able to get a pension from the railroad?

HB: Yes, I have a pension from the railroad.

Boyd Memorial Church and being a Soloist

I: The church has played a major role in your life, will you tell me about that?

HB: I was twenty-five years old when I first saw La Grande, I didn't know how large the place was. There were a lot of black people living here at that time. They

came to my mother's house, met me and we got acquainted. They just wanted to see what I looked like; they were curious. They said, "Anytime you need anything just come on down to the church". So, I started going to the Boyd Memorial Baptist Church.

I: Do you know why it was named that?

HB: Well, I believe it was named after a preacher named Boyd. The Reverend D. D. Banks could have told you about Boyd Memorial, but he is dead now, died in the early 1980s. Dorothy Trice would know because she is involved in the church.

I used to go there when I was first here in La Grande. I quit going because there weren't enough people; they had left La Grande when their kids graduated and left. Some have died as well. The membership had gotten down to three or four members.

I: When you first went to the church were there quite a few people?

HB: Oh yes, there were quite a few.

I: Can you remember some of the church's activities?

HB: We would have our morning services at church, birthday parties, weddings, and funerals -- just a whole lot of different activities.

I: Were all the members of the church black?

HB: No, there were a few whites. I used to do a lot of singing at Boyd Memorial and I think some came to hear me. I sang on the radio quite a bit. Some had heard about me because I sang at the Presbyterian Church, the Christian Church, and at the United Methodist Church.

I: You were invited as a soloist?

HB: Yes, a soloist. I got to sing at all these different organizations like the World Day of Prayer and Salvation Army.

I: Was this all religious music?

HB: Mostly, religious like the *Lord's Prayer* and *I Believe For There's the Drop of Rain that Falls*.

I: Did you sing any other kind of music?

HB: Oh, I sang classical music like "Summertime" from Porgy and Bess.

I: Where'd you learn to sing?

HB: I sang in the choir in high school in St. Louis, Missouri.

I: When you sang at these other churches in La Grande were they paying you?

HB: No. I didn't get any pay for it. Sometimes, I sang at the funeral chapels, for Snodgrass and Daniels.

I: You became rather famous around La Grande, I'd say.

HB: I guess so.

I: Nobody paid you at all to sing?

HB: No, no. I never got paid.

I: Did it occur to you that you should perhaps ask for some money?

HB: When you're doing it for God, I don't think you should ask for money. That's the way I feel. I wasn't destitute or anything.

I: Did you ever tape-record any of your singing?

HB: I did.

I: Do you still have the tape?

HB: I don't know where my tape is. It might be in the storage unit because I got a lot of stuff in storage when I moved.

I: I'd like to hear it.

HB: Do you know Elaine Livingstone?

I: No.

HB: She lives out on Starr Lane and she was my accompanist on the piano. There was another lady, June McManus, and she belonged to the Christian church. She used to play for me. There was Betty Crampton also who would play for me.

I: Tell me about the reactions you got when you sang in other churches and at the funeral homes.

HB: Well, the reactions were very good. They thought I did a very good job when I sang. Every now and then at church I sing, but I'm seventy-five years old now.

I: When did you leave Boyd Memorial Church and join the Mormon Church?

The Mormon Church

HB: Some time in the late 1970's, I left Boyd Memorial Church when it had only older women in their eighties and nineties and there wasn't much in the way of any activities going on. I joined and was baptized in the Mormon Church. I wasn't sure which church to go to, but I prayed and asked God to guide me to a church. In the Baptist Church one of the deacons was going with some of the members in the church and I didn't want my kids to see anything like that.

I: But you'd sung in the Presbyterian, the Methodist and other churches, why didn't consider joining any of them?

HB: I didn't think that they wanted blacks in their choir, I knew for a fact the First Baptist church didn't want blacks in their choir.

I: How did you know that?

HB: Because one of the members of the choir said, "We don't want blacks in the choir, but you can come and participate if we ask you come and sing for us."

I: What did you think about that?

HB: Well, it kind of hurt. I didn't say anything more about it; I just took it and swallowed it. I thought about it and I asked myself, "I wonder why."

I: The Baptist church does have a long tradition in the South and perhaps that was a carry-over?

HB: Maybe. I was singing in the choir for a while and then one of the ladies said, "We don't have blacks in our choir." With that, I didn't ask any questions and I eventually stopped going there. I took their hint.

I: The Mormon Church doesn't have a particularly good reputation for having people with black skin in their membership.

HB: Well, I didn't know that. Now they have plenty of blacks, not here in La Grande because there are not many blacks here any more.

I: Are you the only black member of the Mormon Church here?

HB: I'm the only black member; maybe one or two have joined, but they're not as active as I am.

- I: What else was there about the Mormon church that appealed to you?
- HB: It's their fellowshiping, the Relief Society, that is good. Everybody has something to do. I learned how to direct the music in the choir; I learned how to direct the music in the congregation. Then I taught eleven and twelve-year olds in Sunday School and my husband Willy taught kids in Primary -- seven, eight and nine-year olds.
- I: Was he a member of the church?
- HB: When I first met him he was a member of the church. I joined the church in January the 25th, 1979. I've been a member of the church not quite thirty years.
- I: What have been the more satisfying aspects of living in La Grande.
- HB: La Grande is easy, very nice, comfortable and I like that it is quiet and not a rat race like in the big city.
- I: You're just talking about the general feeling of living in La Grande.
- HB: Yes. I can drive my car and go in peace to the store if I want, because the traffic isn't very heavy here.
- I: Over the years that you've lived in Union county what are some of the frustrations you've felt?
- HB: Now living in a white neighborhood I wonder how would it feel and I said, "now what's going to happen." A funny thing happened, everybody here greeted me; they all gave me a party. We had coffee, sat and talked and I was just flabbergasted. I'm the only black person here in this neighborhood and I get along with everybody and they seem to get along with me.
- I: But I asked you about frustrations. Have you felt any frustrations over the years other than the normal getting through each day kind of frustrations?
- HB: I'm a person that doesn't worry about anything. I'm a person who is going to do it. Being in church, I know I'm the only black woman in the Relief Society. What has got me through everything was the Relief Society. They would ask me how does it feel for you being in the Mormon Church. I would tell them, "Well, at first I felt kind of funny being here." At that time I didn't know that they didn't allow blacks in the Mormon Church. I thought, well, maybe they just put me here, let me come because I wanted to come. They just treated me so well. I just went into the church blindfolded.
- I: The Relief Society is orientated to help other people, isn't it?

HB: Yes, whatever their needs -- food, clothing, whatever.

I: So what is it you do in the Relief Society to help other people?

HB: Once a year we give clothing, food, and money to people who need it.

I: Do you go out delivering these things?

HB: No, we bring it to the church and along about July or August, we have a free market, not a flea market. Anybody that has good clothing, furniture, beddings, or anything like that, delivers it to the church. It is open to all, members of the church or not, to come in and take anything they want. If you need it, you take it, there is no money exchanging hands. There are no sales.

I: What is there about the Relief Society that especially satisfies you?

HB: The Relief Society gives talks about how to manage your money, how to write checks, or open a bank account -- practical every day lessons. They will teach you how to cook, how to take care of your own. They have speakers like the police, to come in and talk to you about safety things. Women like me who are alone, if you're out at night by yourself or if you're coming out of the church by yourself and going to your car, you look under the car as you walk by because anybody could be hiding under your car. Never put your foot too far up under the car when you are unlocking it. Somebody could stick you with a knife and you say, "Ooh, what's that?" Then they grab you and make you unlock your door and push you on in there and the next thing you know, you are a prisoner. Another thing, if you're going to be out by yourself always have two or three ladies together to chaperone each other, like car pooling. Never go out by yourself.

I: It sounds as though this is advice for a large city.

HB: Yes, it is, but it just tells you even in a small city to be careful of who you talk to, and who you let in your house; make sure your doors are locked. I've been doing that for years. We have our singles' dinners. We use the Island City Hall for our suppers. We have weddings there if someone doesn't want to get married in the church, gatherings and little parties. We have the Blue and Gold Ball, dances and amateur hours and all kinds of nice things there at the church in Island City.

I: Apparently, much of your life revolves around the activities at the church?

HB: Yes, that keeps us from going out and getting into trouble.

I: When you're children visit here, or when you talk with them, do they have memories about their lives in La Grande that they share with you?

HB: Oh boy, they tell me some things that they did when they were younger. I said, “Why didn’t you let me know that?” They would just say, “Oh Mama, we did a lot of bad things you didn’t know.” I would say, “See, I’m thinking you were real good boys.” I mean not real bad stuff, just a little mischievous. All the girls liked my boys because they say they were nice boys, they were courteous; they would take the girls to the prom, make sure they’d get home all right, and then they would come home.

I: Do any of them tell you about aspects of living in La Grande that they’re sorry about?

HB: They seemed to like it when they were growing up; they said they had a good time when they were in La Grande.

I: Maybe they’d still be here if they could find good paying jobs.

HB: Yes, they would. If the jobs were real good and they could make good money, they would be here.