

Carrol Lester

2/3/03, T1, S1

JT: I need your name and your birth date again.

CL: Okay. My name is Carrol Lester. I was born October 8<sup>th</sup>, 1939 here in La Grande, Oregon and I graduated from high school here in 1957.

JT: Were you born in the hospital here?

CL: Yeah. I was born in the old St. Joseph Hospital.

JT: The old St. Joseph Hospital. It... Then when you started to school where did you start to school?

CL: I went to Riveria. I went... They had seven grades there. I went through the seventh grade at Riveria and then they had the new high school was built and I think probably in the early '50s, '53 or so, so I went to eighth and ninth grade in the old high school and then the sophomore through senior year went to the present high school and graduated there in '57.

JT: And when...where were you living at the time you were going to Riveria?

CL: We's...my folks were living on 2502 N. Ash Street here in La Grande.

JT: And you lived there most of the time?

CL: I lived there until I was...let's see, I think I was...I was there when I was a junior and then I think later that spring when I was senior we moved down on Russell Street.

JT: And that was across the tracks and didn't you walk up to the high school when you got into high school?

CL: Yeah, we'd always on our way to school we always walk through the yards...through the roundhouse yards over that wooden bridge they had across the mainline tracks or all the tracks by the ice house and then we went off up that way.

JT: And what did your father do during that time?

CL: My father was a machinist in the roundhouse for the...worked for the railroad as a machinist.

JT: It...while you were going to grade school was anything particularly that happened that you enjoyed doing? Games you played?

CL: Oh, we always had kind of like sandlot football and baseball, basketball. We did all that and then there was always times...certain times of the year...I don't...couldn't tell you the exact times, but the Navajo Indians would come in on these big steel gangs and they'd have a softball games goin' over there across from the city shops where they got it all fenced in now, but they play soccer on now, but at that time it was all cinders. And so they'd let us kids go in there and play with 'em. They was pretty good about lettin' us play with 'em and we couldn't understand a lot of 'em. Once in a while one'd speak English, but it was all in Navajo most of it.

JT: I didn't know about that. That's very interesting. Then when you got into high school what...did you take in sports?

CL: Yeah, I went...I played sports, all of 'em, track and some basketball and a little bit of baseball and football was the main thing I liked to play. And we had...at

least when I was a senior in high school not very many people credited to us, but we had a good winning team that year. We won six, tied two and lost one, but we didn't go to State. We...Pendleton...we tied 'em, but we got beat by another team that kind of eliminated us. But if we would've won all the games we should've even though we tied Pendleton we would've got to go.

JT: It was quite competitive during that period of time.

CL: Oh yeah.

JT: Particularly Baker.

CL: Oh yeah. Baker was really a big deal and so was Pendleton. Actually, those two were pretty good real rivals.

JT: And going to school what did you take up that you thought you were going to use when you got out of school?

CL: I really never got too much into the sciences. They didn't have a real good program in that or electronics either. I would've liked to have got further into that, but it was...they only had one course in it. They didn't offer anything to, you know, like they would today probably. I don't know what they do today, but the rest of it, you know, you just...it's kind of a trial and error thing after I got to work to learn what I did know about electronics. But I would've liked to have a good education in it.

JT: I can appreciate that. Then when you graduated from high school did you know what you wanted to do?

CL: No, I didn't really know what I... You know, jobs were kind of hard to find. You could get farm work and stuff like that and I really...still, like a lot of kids, still tryin' to make my mind up. I 's seventeen 'cause my birthday...when out of high school I was seventeen years old and I graduated so I really didn't know. I thought a lot things wouldn't be here like saw mills and all that the way times were tough then, too. And so I went to work for county and sprayed weeds and then I went to college for a couple semesters and then after that I worked for Valset's Lumber Company up at Pondosa. They were logging back in that country in there and I drove a water truck, I watered roads. So I'd get out...I had to get up early in the morning and spend daylight to dark watering roads. And usually catch a logging truck in and logging truck the last one out.

JT: When did you buy your first car?

CL: When I was a senior, in the spring of when I was a senior in high school.

JT: What kind of a car was that?

CL: It was a '49 Chevy. And I had one other car...a couple other ones that was my granddad when he died he give me...he had an old '40 or '41 four-door Plymouth and I sold it and had a Model-A pickup that I got down here...I got...oh, down here from Bill Hermann when he was runnin' a service station. I think he was down here on...where that Oak Street Exxon is. I think it was that was who owned it, but anyway, I bought it from him. It had a wooden canopy on the back. I got...paid seventy-five dollars for it and a guy wanted it so I said, "You can have it for a hundred-and-fifty" and I \_\_\_ I really thought I made a good deal there, hadn't had it a year. And that's...that's about it.

JT: \_\_\_ Model.

CL: Yeah, I wished I still had it, yeah. Had one other Plymouth that was like a '29 Plymouth. I got...after I got my first car and an old painter out here painted houses or some...I don't know what the guy's name is...a coupe and he had a thing on the side where he carried the ladder. But it had an old mirror in the back and it had...first '29 Plymouth that had hydraulic brakes. It was one of the first cars that ever had 'em, I think, of what I've understood. And anyway, I...when I got married Dad kept sayin' "it's gettin' to be like a used car lot around here, you got to do something with these cars" so I sold it to my uncle for thirty-five dollars. [laughs]

JT: How did you meet your wife? You say she went to school at Elgin?

CL: Yeah, she went to school at Elgin and I was actually just goin'...we used to do a lot of...have a lot of dances on Friday and Saturday night up around Elgin and was been goin' to all them and I met her at a dance over there in...I don't remember...1959, I think it was.

JT: You said when you were in high school that Mrs. Burns was your student teacher and then she taught your wife out at Elgin?

CL: Yeah. Mrs. Burns she was my student teacher in English class I had here when I was a senior in high school. She...the class she had was...the other teacher that taught it was Ida McKayly and she was the one that...or did the student teaching for her. And then I met her again after I met my wife 'cause she...of course that was 1957 when I met Mrs. Burns and then after I met my wife in '59 and I got acquainted with her again when she was teachin' school as a regular English teacher over there and my wife really liked her. All younger, all her girlfriends and stuff they really got a lot of 'em. Then I met her again after we were married over in...she was teaching in Hermiston \_\_\_ it was the early '60s, or mid—60s or something like that. I can't...it was in the '60s anyway 'cause we lived there in Hermiston about 1961 or '2...no, about '62. I guess we lived there for a while and then moved here again and we went back over in '64 and what was in like '64 or '5 that she was there when we run onto her again.

JT: When did you first get interested in single?

CL: I got laid off from the road crew up at Valset's Lumber Company in...the summer of '59, it was in the fall of '59. And bought a car and I was thinkin' about goin' in the service and then I had to pay for it someway, you know, it was a '57 Chevy and everybody had to have one. And so I knew a friend of mine, Linda Hodge, her dad was a clerk up there in the road master's office and she said...

JT: John Hodge?

CL: John Hodge. She says, "Dad says they're hirin' up there. Go up and see him." But she didn't tell me where and so what I did it was a temporary job on the section. I worked six weeks relievin' section men that was goin' on vacation. Mainly I was out of Telocaset and the section foreman at that time was Milt Bowers. So anyway, after the six weeks was up in the first part of November they said...went to John, he said, "They're hirin' signal people up at...oh, up on Washing." And I said, "Well, might as well go." So I went and...

JT: Washing was the line between...

CL: Yeah, it was the line between Spokane and Hinkle. And so then I went to work up there for Frank Ingstrom, the signal foreman of the time. And then we stayed

down siding called Pache and that was before...up on the Snake River and that was before \_\_\_ he hadn't relocated any track or any signals or anything. It was...the water was still normal flow on the Snake and what we did is we built the...they made shoe-flies and stuff so they could...we had to move pole line out of the way and all.

JT: A shoe-fly was?

CL: A shoe-fly pole line the same thing as makin' a temporary road somewhere for...you can go temporarily, basically is what it is. So that's what we did. And then...then that...in that...

JT: That was kind of an apprentice during that time?

CL: Yeah, I was the signal helper, yeah. I was just...I was with the...we had three classes, signal helper, assistant signalman and signalman and I was a signal helper at that time. And then in, oh, it was about January of 1960 we moved to Spokane, our signal gang did. And what they were doin' was they had...in fact, that whole Washing had nothin' but...four signals on it. And the reason they wanted them out of there 'cause they were two position type signals, you know, the ones with the blades on 'em. They call 'em the red board, the yellow board and so forth. And so they wanted...wanted to get them out of there. And we went to what they call an automatic permissive block system, it was just colorized system. And it also the pole line up there is...was square cedar poles and fallin' down so we rebuilt the pole line and came down to...what we did is we worked our way from Spokane to Air, Washington and that's where you meet the Snake River. And they got out what they call a high bridge that crosses the Snake River near that point and that's one of the longest bridges in the United States, trestle bridge for railroad. It's about a mile long and at that time it was the deepest drop point. The middle of the bridge is 290 feet...some-odd feet. And it was quite a thrill to me to a train on there 'cause we had cable...they had open cross arms on there and then we hung a cable on there to replace that rather than try to hang extra wire...line around on those arms, ally arms they had on there. It was a little spooky. So then we...I don't know...let's see, tryin' to get back where I was at. Anyway, we worked down there. We had two or three other signal gangs that would work. One would...what we do we was the last gang down. We were called the hook-up gang which we would hook-up the cables and check the wiring out and test all the signals and get ready for a cutover. And then when we'd get caught up we'd go fill in pole line and dig holes and stuff like that. And then they had another gang ahead of us that actually did the pole line and the burying the cable. But if we caught up with 'em through cutovers, why, the signals, why, we do whatever had to be done.

JT: Did you install with relays and things in those little silver metal houses along the track?

CL: Oh yeah. We did all kinds of that, yeah.

JT: A lot of that equipment came from Canada.

CL: No. A lot of this equipment was all Union Switch and Signal. UP was really a \_\_\_ in switch-signal type signal systems. They liked to... And the relays that are mostly that, yeah, they're Union switches, signal relays.

JT: When we put in CTC from La Grande to Huntington I know many of those relays came from Canada.

CL: Probably did. They may have a manufacturing point there that they got 'em out of it. It's very possible, I don't know. But there's nothing on there that I've ever seen or can remember being Canadian \_\_\_.

JT: When did you progress from the lower position \_\_\_?

CL: We got...I got the...you had to bid these jobs in and I bid a job in on Ben Dorickson's gang and he was down along Humurous, down in the lower part of the Snake River.

JT: And this was all seniority.

CL: Yeah, all seniority bidding, you know.

JT: The signal department was different than trainmen because the signal department went from Portland to Huntington and from Hinkle to Spokane.

CL: Yeah, they had different districts, but we covered what they call a whole division, which the Oregon Division is what we were called and that encompassed Washington and Oregon, but not Idaho 'cause Idaho was a separate division.

JT: Some of the people wouldn't understand difference between their...the trainmen and the signal department.

CL: No. It's different. I couldn't even explain all the trainmen stuff. I don't know how they keep track of it their self. But, yeah, I bid that system signalman's job in and I don't know...the time frame was in the '60s, '61 or so...and then I...you had to do that in order to get your date. You didn't wantta miss out on somebody runnin' around ya 'cause that's what would happen. 'Cause then if you bid on a signalman's job and even though you hired out before him and he beat you on a system state you're gonna be way behind when you get the position of signalman class. That's your class...

JT: Keep your seniority.

CL: Yeah, you want to keep you seniority right with ya as you go.

JT: At that time they still had the dispatcher's office in La Grande.

CL: Yeah. At that time they still had the dispatching office in La Grande They had what they call East and West dispatchers there. One was La Grande to...I think at that time I started it was La Grande to Hinkle and the east on went from La Grande to Huntington.

JT: And later changed to Nampa.

CL: Yeah. And later on it then encompassed... What happened was in 1967 they moved the La Grande dispatching office to Portland, Oregon, consolidated it there 'cause we had a...we did quite a bit of CTC work between Hinkle and Portland. And then they brought in Nampa...from Huntington to Nampa to Portland. And then when they took what was at Nampa to Pocatello, they kept it down in Pocatello.

JT: And when you say CTC that stood for Central...

CL: Centralized Traffic Control. Was all...that's what those...oh, when they consolidate the dispatchers they used that to have...that's controllin' the traffic of your train, routing your trains, clearin' the signals for 'em and movin' the switches. And you eliminated the train order board stuff.

- JT: The dispatcher watched the board and he could actually track the train on the track from those division points.
- CL: Yeah. They tracked this \_\_ what the Centralized Traffic Control, you got the dispatching center which tracks your train and that's done through the activation of track circuits and different things that...apparatuses along the track where they can track the train to see what...where he's between what siding, between what switches. They can line a power switch over or the siding and it'll tell whether it's line normal, reverse. They can clear a signal over the switch and route the train one direction or the other over the switch.
- JT: Did your trainmen then they called in by radio or telephone? How were they communicating with dispatchers?
- CL: At that time they had a phone in the signal houses to communicate with...when I first started. They didn't get the radio... They started a little radio dispatching there in La Grande just before they moved it to Portland, but it wasn't a...it worked, but, you know, the whole networks of the Union Pacific communication system wasn't...it was just in it's infancy stage, you know. And I know one of the concerns at the time Harold Stratton, who was assistant signalman...or chief signal engineer at that time, he made a decision that when they got in Portland they would use the microwave to communicate back and...to talk on plus use our coding equipment over...over that, too. He was, you know...at that time they thought it was a big risk. The main reason that that is you don't want to have downtime lose your, you know, your dispatching system where you can't track trains anymore. \_\_ lines that we always used and that way, you know, knew that worked.
- JT: In the old days they had an operator at each of these little depots. They had a hoop out there and they gave a line-up. You were \_\_ right with the dispatcher and he told where something was gonna meet ya.
- CL: Yeah. You got your train orders and you picked up, you know, you got your information and that way and whether you were gonna make a meet at a certain place and if you needed pickups to get, boxcars or somethin', you got that information, too. Or slow-orders, you know, kind of stuff that was goin' on work trains and stuff where you have gangs workin'...track gangs workin' they probably had a slower situation somewhere and they'd tell 'em what milepost it was at, what speeds and all that. They knew all their...tell 'em what speed to travel and all that stuff.
- JT: Once they got most of the mechanical work out on the road done that you bid in a signalman's job then?
- CL: Yeah, I did. I bid a signalman's job in actually on a...Don Blent was his name. I got my signalmen's date with him. He was...we was doin' some signal pole line work...no, we's puttin' in switch heaters up here on the mountain is when that was. And I can remember that, you know, that November...I made it in September of the same year that John Kennedy was assassinated 'cause we was down...in November we was down at the siding in Huron when we heard that information. The dispatcher told us over the phone that he'd been assassinated. I think that was 1963, if I remember right. And from there on I bid back on Frank Ingstrom's gang as a signalman and we worked from...on the new CTC from

Hinkle to Biggs. And that was on the account of the John Day Dam going in and we havin' a new main line built on the freeway, which you can see there today. All those signals you see pretty much going on the highway I helped hang some of the cables and tested. There was a lot of people doin' it, but I did most...most of the...

JT: That was relocated because of the course of the river was changing.

CL: Yeah.

JT: On...what is the signal maintainer usually do out there? What's the daily work?

CL: They... Their... Their main concern is is they have federal regulations that we have to abide by and there's several things you have to check on every month and every quarter you make certain adjustments. And one of the things is you gotta make sure your switch machines are adjusted so that they'll fail on a quarter-inch gauge that's in the track. Other words, if your switch point's gapped open over a quarter-of-an-inch that there's circuitry in the switch machine that allows it to put the signals to stop, that's what it's supposed to do. That's... The whole idea of signaling is safety and that's one of things...one of your adjusting features that you do to make sure that it's...something gets in a switch point and don't go all the way over and lock up, why, then you're not gonna be able to clear a signal.

JT: And you worked hand in hand with the section crew then and the section foreman.

CL: Yeah. If the section foreman needed to be there to tamp ties or whatever it was, why, they did it, or change a rail out or switch point. Switch points a lot of times they go chips in 'em and you need to change 'em out. You know, they know when to do it so you just...whatever reasons like that.

JT: Then there were wires connecting the rails together.

CL: We had bond wiring in along the jointed rail and we had, oh, other connections to the rail we had to maintain all the time, make sure they was on there all the time. And there's other, you know, they're...I can't really sit here and quote you all the rules 'cause there's too many of 'em. But they all had to, you know, they had to maintain the equipment we had, the apparatuses, the batteries and so on and so forth, clean the lenses on the signals and...

JT: But it was a cooperative effort between the section and the signal maintainers.

CL: Right.

JT: To see that the road was safe for train travel.

CL: Yeah. That was the whole idea of workin' together, yeah.

JT: And a lot of the line isn't covered by highway. You had to travel by speeder or...

CL: Highrail it or somethin' like that. We either motor carred it or highrail, which ever. Most of the time in the early days it was all motor car and you travel from one siding to the other that way with permission of the dispatcher.

JT: And then there was quite a lot of rock fence. What was the purpose of rock fences?

CL: They had a lot of rock slides in this area, of course, and the idea there could be a pretty good-sized rock come down and get in the middle of track and derail a train. With the rock fence there, why, it's break the wire and it'd put the signals to stop on each side of this rock fence and that way the train wouldn't...it'd stop the train so he could probably get permission to go by the red signal, but he'd had to go at restricted speed so he'd be aware to stop.

JT: That's when they called out the signalmen to...

CL: Yeah, usually at night. Everybody...it seemed like everybody was at night on those kind of things.

JT: Did they put the propane heaters under switches during the time that you were working?

CL: Yeah.

JT: Before that it was kerosene, wasn't it, heaters?

CL: Yeah. It was kerosene heaters. I know they had older...I don't remember exactly when they put the first propane heaters in. They were kind of a handmade one that the signal shop had made and then we later on got a different...same kind of a theory, but we got a different kind of a heater. And then 1963 was an open flame heater and then later on we upgraded to what they got now and it's the hot air blower. It's run by propane, but it's like a furnace in your house. Just a got a big fire...burns...puts heat out, channels it down each side of the rail and melts...

JT: Clear through the ice and the snow and kept the switches working properly.

CL: Yeah. Took us out of the dark ages when it came...as far as switch heaters go.

JT: You said that you were responsible for demolishing the signal maintainers houses and section house at Telocaset.

CL: Just signal houses is all because the...they had different union agreements and we didn't need the houses anymore, then, too, they didn't want to keep 'em around, kind of property taxes they got rid of. The railroad didn't want 'em standing up because they paid property tax on 'em. There's nobody in 'em, they was old houses, and they was hard to upkeep, really. They was... Some of 'em they fixed...some of those maintainers had 'em fixed up pretty nice, but even I helped 'em with some of the internal types of people that worked on plumbing and, you know, housework.

JT: It was a tax thing.

CL: Yeah, that and the union agreement, you know, that they didn't need to stay there anymore.

JT: They lengthened the district for a signal maintainer once they got the CTC in to a larger area. Can you tell about how many were before and then how many after?

CL: I think in this...when they had the semi-four type signaling and they...their territories were about, oh, maybe fifteen...twelve to fifteen miles. And then when they put the CTC in from La Grande to Reese then they cut that down...I mean they cut off a few maintainers and extended the lengths of the territories could be anywhere from, say, some of it's twenty to thirty-five miles just depending...depending on what you to maintain, you know. Some areas in the short distance you had quite a few things to maintain. And then later on as time progresses they...they get longer and longer, they cut jobs off. The types of technology they was getting... You know, like I think right now they're fairly long.

JT: You found the signal department very interesting?

CL: Yeah. Always...it was always somethin' different everyday. I mean you knew your work, but you still...there's always somethin' that would come along technology-wise or if you had other things you had over the night would have and you have to go fix or whatever. It wasn't like goin' to a factory and twistin' the



same screws and so on...nailin' a board everyday. It was always just somethin' different.

JT: It wasn't assembly line.

CL: No, it wasn't assembly line.

JT: Was there anything you want...would like to have done better than work for the signal department?

CL: I don't think so. I don't know. I really enjoyed it. I can't think of anything. I was treated well. I can't...had good people workin' with me and I learned a lot from them and...I should say with each other, you know. You know, it was always somethin' to learn.

JT: I interviewed a trainman recently and he said it enabled him to make a living wage and to raise his family and have a nice home. Do you feel that way?

CL: Oh yeah. I've, you know, I got a good living out of it. I can't...I really don't have any complaints at all. I... It was a little rough when you was onto a signal gangs and you had a family. It was really...you had to have a good woman behind ya because most women...there's a lot of 'em that parted company with ya...with their men because it was hard. Because you got a family and you might be gone all week long and come home on the weekends and here, you know, if you got two or three kids, you know how if you got little ones what that's like, you know. But, you know, we worked our way through it.

JT: Working out on the outfits you got meals through DC&H?

CL: You know, I never did. We never, you know, they never did. We had our outfit cars we stayed in, bunk cars, and we always packed our own grub. We had our own stoves to cook on, or a stove to cook on that's the way we just bach'ed in 'em. You could've. If they wanted one they would...they asked ya if you wanted one, but it cost so much we decided there wasn't enough men there to warrant one. 'Cause a lot of times, you know, on some of those older construction days where they had a lot of men workin' on a gang they might have twenty men, they might have another gang beside 'em and that way it would warrant to have a DC&H car there to cook for ya.

JT: Back about 1947, '48 when I was workin' they had DC&H, but we had more men working. And we lived in outfit cars, which was a boxcar along side the railroad tracks with a shower car where you could take a shower...[end tape]

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JT: ...used to living in an outfit car because the train was going right by within...how many feet would you say?

CL: Oh, I don't know. There'd be sometimes they'd be...it depends on where we were at. On the Washer there was some of them siding house tracks usually up there there had some short house tracks and they would probably be thirty feet from the...forty feet from the track. Go whizzin' by there in the middle of the night and the wind from the train goin' by kind of rock you around a little bit plus wake you up 'cause it's not exactly quiet.

JT: It seemed like at Telocaset that was pretty close the tracks.

CL: Yeah. I know there was a couple places that was...up there on the Washy that was...we was on the middle...I couldn't even...I can't even remember the name. Ainkin? No, it wasn't that. Some...it probably isn't even there anymore, but we set way out...

JT: Starbuck?

CL: This was on the...below Air there. I can't remember the name of it. 'Cause they tore it out and that's why... I don't remember the name of the place. That's the only way. It was too far away from the town. You didn't have much of choice. We did a lot of carpooling, too, and we got in different towns, you know, like we went to Hermiston and lived there. We carpoled to get to work. We parked down there at Rufus and we...you know, that's about ninety miles one way, but that's worth the drive. Sleep and let the guy drive, catch a nap on the way back every day.

JT: Everybody took turns.

CL: Yeah, everybody took turns.

JT: It was a very interesting way of makin' a living. How many children did you have?

CL: I had three, two boys and a girl. The girl's in the middle.

JT: And most of the time where did you live? At Hermiston?

CL: We lived at Hermiston for, oh...I'm tryin' to remember how many years. We lived there from about 1963 till 1971 or '2, I can't remember. Then we came back here in 1972, I think it was, maybe '71. I can't really remember. It was in the December time and I...and prior to that time...of course the dispatchers had moved to Portland in 1967 and I was involved workin' on that in Portland, too. Anyway, I moved back here and I bid a job then as a general CTC maintainer here in La Grande, but I...what I did prior to that I just relieved the general maintainers, the one in Portland, the one in La Grande where the two dispatching centers was. And then when I bid the one here they didn't have...the dispatching center was gone in La Grande, but they...we...what I did was maintain the coding apparatus in the field control locations and things like that. And we did also work on some hot box detectors which we put in in 1965 here in La Grande when I got in on that, too.

JT: What kind of boxes?

CL: We called 'em hot box detectors. What they do is detect hot \_\_ on box cars. They set along side the track at different locations to give you a read out and tell you whether...what side of the car and what axle on the car was hot and then they'd set the car out.

JT: It got very high tech, really.

CL: Oh yeah, it was. That's the reason they got...one of the reasons they got rid of the cabooses was the hot box detector \_\_ equipment stuff. Modern technology has made a big splash in the railroad in the last...since...probably since 1980. They just progressin' all the time.

JT: Was it harder when the dispatchers moved out of La Grande and it was such a long distance?

CL: Everything as far as controlling trains a lot of trainmen probably not say that, but it worked the same. The difference was that you didn't have the...and this is what

I'd miss as a trainman...is comin' by the dispatching office and sayin' howdy and talk to a dispatcher or somethin' like that where La Grande was the terminal.

JT: More of a personalized...

CL: Personalize. It was more of a personalized thing. I think that's what...I would miss it, I know I did, so I think I could speak for some of the trainmen.

JT: You got to know all the people and...

CL: Yeah, the trainmen they all knew the dispatchers, dispatchers knew them and, you know, they kind of had some, you know, relationship that way.

JT: Did you ever work here when Eldon Thompson was one of the dispatchers?

CL: Yeah. He was... He was here workin'. Eldon Thompson was and so was, oh, Delbert Lee. He was the one and then there was...

JT: Felix Kabell.

CL: Felix Kabell. He was a chief dispatcher.

JT: Did you work during the time Wayne Drummon was dispatcher?

CL: Yeah, he was there when I was there. I was, oh...let's see...Don Hepburn was the other one and Jim Gary was there and so was \_\_\_\_. And then there was one other guy, Don...his brother runs that spray place now...Tannahill, Don Tannahill was here. They were assistant chiefs and then...and they... And the reason I kind of knew them I relieved the maintainer...general maintainer at the time here was Glen Balcom, Bud Balcom, so they had nobody to relieve him so they asked me if I wanted to let...work with 'em to learn how to do it. And it was...I'll tell ya, that was a big responsibility. You know, I was really worried, you know, about it 'cause I didn't know...I didn't figure I ever knew...might not know enough, but I learned. I learned the hard way, but I did learn. And then I went to Portland and they had a general maintainer down there in Portland which I worked for about two years with \_\_ Harold Thomas and he really taught me a lot. Both those guys taught me. I owe a lot to those two people. And there's others, too, that I know I learned from, too. I'm not just sayin'...but these is where you're up on that end where you have to, you know, somethin' goes down you better be knowin' how to fix it 'cause if it's gonna tie your whole dispatchin' center up there you are. Boy, you better be on the ball and get after it.

JT: It sounds like it was quite a situation and the main thing for people to understand is the division had to be the whole railroad. It couldn't be just La Grande, it had to take the whole railroad to make it work.

CL: Yeah. Yeah. It is a team effort basically. The best way to look at it.

JT: How did Hinkle work out there? It was quite a large place.

CL: There's another thing the signal department manages, maintains, is that classification yard over there in Hinkle. Then they got all those retarders and what...things like that in there. That's...

JT: Could you explain what a retarder is?

CL: A retarder is...what it does is squeezes just like a brake when the boxcar comes over the hump hill there to go down into bowl. They got 'em settin' down on a kind of a grade and as they go through it it squeezes the wheels to slow it down. And what this...all controlled by computer so they weigh the car, they know how much, you know, the car is, then they go and they squeeze it and then they get the

coupling speed to go down in and couple up four or five mile an hour so they, you know, you get into freight damages and stuff.

JT: So they don't have to have an engine pushin' it all the way.

CL: No.

JT: They come up on the hump and it's kind of a raised platform and then it sends the car down on the track.

CL: Yeah. They just...they got...I think there's somebody there that uncouples the car, brakemen or somethin' or whatever he's called and they uncouple as they go, which they know where they want...they got bowls and groups and tracks, you know, and they...in the bowl and they designate it to go...

JT: Is this where those sounds came from by squeezing the...you know, there was...it's a time that some of the trainmen down there were hearing...

CL: Yeah, that's part of it, yeah. That's just one of the...that's the main issue on 'em, I imagine, yeah.

JT: I didn't understand where that sound came from. Then it would be...

CL: You gotta wear hearing protection to go around, it's a must and a safety rule, I think, to go around that place. You don't go outside without 'em.

JT: Now I know a little bit more about that. I really didn't understand what was happening there. And then how many years did you have to work before you retired?

CL: I worked thirty-six years. And then during that time I was promoted to what the assistant signal supervisor and then they changed that title to...in about 1986 they called us managers of signal maintenance. And they don't have that title like that anymore. But anyway, when I retired I was the manager of signal maintenance, La Grande, Oregon. And we went...my territory went from Echo, Oregon to Shoshone, Idaho. It was about four hundred and some miles of main line.

JT: Boy!

CL: And that was that way for a couple years. They's always, always merging and stuff. They were constantly changin' stuff around. Now it...it's not...it's changed again. The guy that's on my territory, the territory that I had, there's even one west of...there was two of us out here on this end and now there's only one and he goes from here, I think, up to panhandle of Idaho and up to Washy and stuff like that, you know. There's a lot of...lot of territory.

JT: You said you came from a railroad family, that your dad had worked in the roundhouse over here.

CL: Yeah. My granddad, my dad's dad, he came from Virginia here in about...out in this country about 1903 or '04 and went to Wallowa and worked in the saw mill. Then he decided he could do better down here in La Grande and went to work for railroad in about 1907 or '08 and he retired 1944 and he had about thirty-four or five years in. And then my dad hired out...

JT: Your dad's name was?

CL: Ben Lester.

JT: Ben Lester.

CL: And he hired out in 1934 and retired in 19--...well, he had forty...well, he retired when he was sixty so I think he had about forty or forty-two years in when he retired.

JT: Did...where was he when they removed the roundhouse from the yards out here?  
CL: He was here. He always... He never did leave. The only time he left here was did his apprenticeship when I was probably about a year old and he went to Portland for about a year, 1940, then he came back here.

JT: Safe to say that every family around the valley here in some way were connected to the railroad with some member of their family working for the railroad.

CL: Right.

JT: And it really made the community, you might say.

CL: Oh yeah. Yeah, I should give you that book I got, a 1925 book I got from my cousin that I copied from him about...the article was totally about La Grande in 1925 and it tells you a lot of things of what the values of...I guess amount...I think it had quite a bit to say about the amount of money that each outfit made, you know, contribute to the county and what taxes, you know, and what the main resources were here. Kind of interesting if you like history. The thing I learned out of that...one of the things I learned out of that magazine that the degree of temperature of the water out there at Hot Lake is 209 degrees in that one...they claim...you always heard it'd scald pigs out there, so called. That's in that book.

JT: It... There was a lot of depots. There was even a depot at Hot Lake, a depot at Island City in the early days.

CL: The ones I... The ones I remember when I...that I can remember when I was over here reliev' maintainers or anything, things like that, I can remember the one at...as a kid the one there at Island City and then the Union junction was still goin' and there's one at...the Telocaset one I can't remember. I don't remember bein' one there, but the one that was on North Powder and there was one at Haines and then there was one at, oh, the one at Durkee...I know there was one there, but I don't remember seein' it.

JT: It wasn't very big.

CL: And then there was the one at Huntington which was obvious, you know, it was an older depot, but it was pretty good sized.

JT: It was division point again with roundhouse and yards there which...

CL: Yeah, there was one at Duncan and there's one at...not Gibben...there's one at Duncan, one at Camilla. I didn't...there's one at Meacham I don't...I couldn't tell ya. I mean it was there, but the buildings were up there it was hard to figure...they'd moved 'em over to one side so...I think where one 'em is used as a youth group place at Meacham now.

JT: A lot of history.

CL: Yeah. A lot of it.

JT: Did you ever have anything to do with the branch?

CL: No, I never really. The only thing we did on the branch is we had to maintain the train overboards 'cause up the branch...that was train over to...Joseph branch was train overboard territory and they had at the time there was on at Imbler, but I don't think that was there too long. But I remember one very well at Elgin and the one at Wallowa and there was one at Enterprise.

JT: Did you ever ride the train up and go fishin'?

CL: No. Never did get to do...

JT: \_\_\_\_\_

CL: No, but my father-in-law as a kid he, you know, he and his dad they used to take it up there quite often and drop 'em off and pick 'em up.

JT: A lot of people did in those early days. I always thought it was interesting to ride the railroad up the....

CL: Yeah.

JT: ...back. But a lot of jobs have been eliminated...

CL: Oh yeah.

JT: ...but as long as we have the hill both ways do you think La Grande will maintain a division for your trainmen?

CL: Yeah, unless they can...yeah, I think they will unless they have some other kind of a grandiose plan that we don't know about. But they're...at times they were talkin' about tunnels over the years and even when I was there they tried it again. But the way these mergers have...this is my own opinion...is the way the mergers are now with all these other railroads that you'll probably never see a tunnel or...unless there's abundance of traffic. But, no, right now they've got quite a bit of double track when I would there, made sidings a lot longer so they can handle quite a load of traffic until they get to the mountains area and that's when it...it will slow down on 'em. But that's...that's the way it's been since day one, you know, only that's...only handles so many trains in a certain area without slowin' a bunch of 'em down.

JT: When we removed so many sidings and things it would almost seem like they could've expanded those sidings into double track.

CL: They did on some of 'em. They actually...they actually did on a couple of 'em. I'm tryin' to think where they...you know like from Oxman...we call it Oxman...they moved it...they call it Prichard Creek now and they...Oxman is a siding no-longer, but they moved it down where the freeway crosses the track there, the second after you cross it and then you cross it again closer to Durkee. Prichard Creek's right there and that...they got double track from there up that horseshoe and it goes all the way around and comes up there right under the other freeway bridge. And that's what we call West Oxman. And then they...what they'd like to do is double track it all the way up to Pleasant Valley. And if they did that they could have from Ensigna to Prichard Creek they could have double track all the way. And that would...that's the really a kind of a bottleneck there right now, but I don't know. They was talkin' about doin' that when I was there and they're still there, so I don't know if that will...they'll ever double track that piece in there till you see it happenin'.

JT: They removed a lot of the tunnels that used to be, but they still do have that one down there by Durkee down...

CL: The one down there it's down there between Lime and Weatherby, closer to Weatherby.

JT: There used to be one at Telocaset.

CL: \_\_\_\_ that one.

JT: Meacham.

CL: Yeah, those day...I was here when they daylighted all of them, just changed it. Up on the Washy where I first started workin' they had all...several tunnels, a lot of tunnels up there.

JT: Was there any left on that stretch goin' to Portland?

CL: No.

JT: All those...

CL: Well, wait a minute. There is...there's a...there might be one there...

JT: This side of The Dalles?

CL: No, that's...it might be. I can't...spend a lot of time down there, but the only one I know for sure, the one I was thinkin' there, is 'cause we had a derailment when I's workin' on a gang down there. It was out there at St. Johns. They got one that goes in from the yards...out behind the yards, that goes...kind of where it comes out is...I think it's Quando Boulevard where it comes out and that tunnel in there's probably about, oh, half-a-mile long, three-quarter maybe. They got one there.

JT: The railroad is really changed the way they do business.

CL: Oh yeah. Yeah. You know, I...when I was younger I relieved a couple times in Interlochen plant, one in...it's where all your interchanges come from foreign railroads, you know. It's quite a operation. A guy sits in a tower and he pulls these levers to route the trains and stuff like that. You've probably seen 'em on these older...some of these older movies if you've seen a guy pullin' these levers. And there was one in Spokane and then there was one in Portland and one on each side of the river. In fact, there's still that type operation on the west side of the river. And there was one up in Seattle. And I never relieved the one in Seattle, but I was up there on a gang one time, but that was a aeronumatic, the switches. Instead of electric switch machine moving your points over it was air. It looked just...just to look at it everything out on the track where it was pushin' the switch point over to line your traffic routes, why, the only you heard was "swoosh" and a "bang," it was over. You didn't want to have your fingers anywhere close, but they had a deal...device on the back of the switch machine you'd take the cap off and then you'd stick a...somethin' down there, if I remember right, that it'd cut the air off while you's workin' on it. But it had lever...tower operator he'd sit up there and he had levers and signal levers and he'd pull all this stuff and line all the routes. See, that's gone. They did that and... I wasn't involved in it, but they did it while I was workin'. They got rid of that one and the one on the east side of the river at Portland they got ride of that, oh, in the late '80s. And there was one in...the one up in Spokane I can't...I think they got rid of that, too, but that was owned by the Northern Pacific, or the Burlington Northern now, but we maintain it. That...there's all kinds of different... There's one thing I like about railroad sig...or any kind of signaling, you know, there's all kinds of things that...that's involved in signaling. You got...like if you had certain types of signaling out here in La Grande to Huntington was a total different type of system. And then it did...on the appearance of it looked the same, but the way it worked was totally different than west of La Grande. It was... It was all...

JT: Integrated...

CL: All totally different and now when the whole \_\_\_ on the new technology the one west of La Grande was an old one when they did their newer technology they integrated it into this newer type electronics 'cause theory-wise it's the same. Did away with a lot of pole line, you know. This technology world we live in has

changed a lot, got rid of a lot of jobs, which I don't like to see, but it's just the way it is.

JT: And used to have a lot of men on the train and, gosh, it's down now...

CL: Yeah, two or three some on a...

JT: Still operate the train.

CL: Yeah, it's quite a...quite a change.

JT: There's a lot of the railroaders are interested in model railroading and stuff like that. There's whole groups down in Portland that have...build tracks and...

CL: Do they? Yeah, I've heard of 'em. I don't...why...I don't do that. What I like to do I like to go around the...more interested in going to these...like to Sacramento I went down there once to their steam fair where they brought in a lot of live steam locomotives and stuff like that. I like to go do that and I'll go to museums and look through stuff once in a while. But I never really got into the model portion of it.

JT: You ever been over to Prineville to see the old Shay that used to be Mt. Emily?

CL: No. I saw... No, that Shay was down there the time we were at Sacramento, I think it was 1999 we went down there, 'cause the UP brought both their steam engines down there and then it was...the Shay was there and then Sumpter brought their little woodburner down there. It was all kinds of stuff. It was amazing to see all the different kinds of steam locomotives they had there. There's...quite impressive and they got really a mus...railroad museum there in Sacramento. It's right there at that...where they hold this.

JT: That's what I've heard.

CL: And it's in a big old...I think they got it from Southern Pacific terminal roundhouse is what it is. And you go inside that thing and it's got...it's got some amazing steam locomotives in there. They've got that...the Southern Pacific designed one that had the cab on the front, the steam one. And the reason there were so many towns goin' over, you know, Sierras that they couldn't see kind of the smoke. So that was one of the reasons they did that and it just looks like it was goin' forward, but it looks like he's goin', you know, he's goin' the other way. [laughs] He ought to be goin' the other way than he's goin' forward with the cab on.

JT: What do you think about the county...Wallowa and Union county buyin' the railroad up to Joseph?

CL: I kind of...you know, I kind of...I can see in a way why they're doin' it and it'd be great if it'd work, but I just have my reservations. I don't know whether it's gonna...how it's gonna work. I'd like to see it work, but, you know, in mind I can't see it workin'. I don't think they can make any money at it unless they had a steam engine, you know. But that'd be a calling card. And I just don't...I don't know what they have in mind. 'Cause I don't think there's a revenue up there to get it. It's just the articles you saw in the paper, you know, you just can't...the UP would've kept it if...if it was makin' money. I think the county should've bought it for \$25,000 like that old Northern did and then they could sell it and make money. That's what the whole...in there.

JT: You know, we live right here in the hub of everything that would be so great and it would help the community and everything else.



CL: You know, if it...if you can get the tourism doin' it I guess more power to 'em, but I don't know. I do know over there in Idaho...and I don't know whether I should be...how accurate I'd be right now today sayin' it, but I do know that they had an Idaho Northern...there's a club over there in Boise, as I understood, a railroad club, you know, a lot of 'em buff...railroad buffs. And anyway, they got this formed and there was one engineer that was workin' for the Idaho Northern that was part of it. But anyway, they got this excursion train goin' from Kaska, Idaho down about fifteen miles before they dropped down into the canyon. And I guess that every time they run it it's full. And they got about four coaches and I don't know how many... But it's a kind of a pretty scene, you know, for the no more than it is. Then they got another one they run from Horseshoe Bend, or maybe Amita, to...I can't remember that other little place, but it...I guess they manage it, but I don't know if they're makin' any money or how they do it.

JT: Might be hard to do. When you were growing up here did you hunt and fish?

CL: I hunted a little, but I never did a lot of fishing 'cause I didn't have the patience to do it. And so I didn't get that way until...I go with my dad and he'd always get a basketful and I was maybe have a little tougher time doin' it, my line tangled so I thought I had other fish to fry, you know. But he was quite a fisherman, but I wasn't till later on when I got married and my father-in-law and then my dad too that they got...we got into the fishing mode and we'd do quite a bit of fishing.

JT: Where did you go?

CL: We used to go down to Lookin' Glass. My father-in-law got me to goin' down there. And when I was, oh, it was probably in \_\_ twenty-five years old we'd...he's always liked to do huntin' and fishin' so I did quite a bit with him. And he...they go down that Lookin' Glass. We'd hike in above Sophie Davis' cabin and then we'd fish from there up to Eagle Creek. And it...I mean to tell you it was a lot of fun. Nice sized trout and at that time you could catch the...the bull trout and every once in a while you'd see in...we was down there a time or two in July and you could see...I think the salmon had...you could see 'em where they'd had somethin' like a bear had grabbed one and had part of it tore up on the bank. Or you'd see 'em...and you could see 'em in the water, you know, diein', but there wasn't a lot of 'em, but you could see 'em.

JT: Did you ever see 'em over in Catherine Creek?

CL: When I... I went fishin' with my dad when I was a kid I'd go over there, I'd been with him a time or two and been with 'em when he's caught 'em right out of Cat...on not too far this side of Union. I can't remember the exact place.

JT: Probably out there on the Davis ranch.

CL: Probably was, yeah.

JT: Where the dam was out there.

CL: Out in that area someplace. And I've got pictures of my dad and my granddad they probably fishin' there somewhere they had caught salmon. And I can only judge by the year of the car they was standin' by, but it had to be...I guess my dad was probably about eleven or twelve years old and they's holdin' up salmon and, you know, he wasn't...you know, it was all he could do to keep the tail off the ground. [laughs] It was pretty good-sized salmon. And I went with my wife's dad up a couple...or one time up to Francis Lake. We hiked in and we did a lot of

fishing around, oh, just different streams. I kind of like the stream fishing. It's a lot of fun to do to get out there and just get lost and get out there and walk down the stream and fish and not see any...

JT: Go up to Tony Vay's?

CL: No. Oh, I have, but not...not very much.

JT: We always liked to take the trip up to Tony Vay's and up over the top to Granite and then to Sumpter, to Baker and then back to La Grande. Such a pretty drive in the fall.

CL: Oh yeah. Yeah, it is. [recording stopped]

JT: State your name and your birthday.

CL: My name is Carrol Lester. I was born October 8<sup>th</sup>, 1939 here...[end tape]