ELMER PERRY

Union County resident for 83 years

AN ORAL HISTORY

Interviews in June & September, 2002
at his home in La Grande OR

Interviewers: Vanessa Clemens & Eugene Smith

UNION COUNTY, OREGON HISTORY PROJECT
2004
(revised from 2003)

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

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

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

Purposes

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

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copies of transcripts are $4.00 each + shipping & handling

Preface

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

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

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

About the Interviews and This Edited Version

The interviews with Elmer Perry took place at his home in La Grande. At age 83, Elmer is physically active and alert mentally.

The interviewers were Vanessa Clemens and Eugene Smith, volunteers with the Union County, Oregon History Project. She completed two one-hour interviews on May 27 amd June 3, 2002; he completed two follow-up interviews on September 5 and 9 , 2002.

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

- reorganization of content

- deletion of some extraneous comments

- omission of false sentence starts and other normal speech fillers that detract from readability

- normalization of pronunciation and grammar in conformity with standards of written English.

EP designates Elmer Perry's words, *I* the interviewers'.

CONTENTS

Born and Raised in Union County

I: Please tell me when and where you were born.

EP: I was born on June 19, 1919 in Imbler, Oregon--under an apple tree.

I: You were literally born under an apple tree?

EP: Literally. They went out in an apple orchard, cut down two trees, and built a house. That's where we were born and raised.

I: What is your full name?

EP: Elmer Lewis Perry. The Lewis part is after my grandfather, Lewis Perry. My mother's name was Jessie Henrie. She was a pioneer to the Grande Ronde Valley. My father was Charles Franklin Perry. He also came to the county at the turn of the nineteenth century. I was born not long after they came, so I feel like I was a bit of a pioneer, too.

They came here seeking employment at the lumber mills and the sugar business. They also came for farming; they bought small farms to live on.

I: Do you know what they'd heard about the valley to make them think this was a promising place to try to find employment?

EP: They came from Utah, where sugar beets are grown, and they'd heard about the new sugar business in La Grande.

I: They didn't hear about the downside of that sugar business then?

EP: It hadn't been proven to be unsuccessful at that time. There were developments in that sugar business that were not foreseeable at that time.

I: I know it wasn't a fly-by-night operation.

EP: No, it was very carefully thought out, but they didn't have irrigation water. If they had come a century later, now that we have deep wells, they could have watered. Sugar beets grow here very well now.

In the early 1900s and even before the turn of the century, the lumbering business was thriving. The Stoddards were some of the main lumber people; I knew many of the later family members.

I: Who did you know best in that family?

EP: David I. Stoddard, one of the sons of the original George Stoddard family. When the Stoddard family moved the mill from Upper Perry to Pondosa [near Baker City, east of La Grande], he sold out. Then he became a bank president in La Grande. I also knew a few of his brothers.

I: What caused them to move the mill from Perry?

EP: The timber was more accessible. They were right in the middle of the timber country in Pondosa.

I: Do you mean by *more accessible* that they could get it out of the forest more easily? At Perry they had to bring it down by train or slide it down the hills, didn't they?

EP: They didn't have big trucks then, so it all had to be done by railroad or by floating logs down the Grande Ronde River.

I: So was it simply then a matter of its becoming too costly to operate a mill there?

EP: Probably.

I: They had a huge investment in it, didn't they?

EP: Yes, but, of course, they moved their equipment; that's where much of their costs were.

I: Do you remember seeing any of the moving operation?

EP: No, but I do remember my dad's going up there when they were selling the last lumber to cash in what they had. He bought pine boards for $5.00 a thousand and built a garage with it.

Growing-up Experiences

I: What were some of your growing-up experiences during the Depression?

EP: All the time I was growing up during the Depression--those dear old days--we were poor as church mice, but we always had plenty to eat.

I: Did you have a cow and a garden?

EP: We had cows, pigs, chickens, rabbits, and a big garden. We bottled and canned our fruit and butchered our own meat. We often took ham sandwiches to school for lunch.

I started building things when I was about six or seven years old, and I seriously built things all my life. It was a gift that had come down through many generations.

I: Can you remember some of the first items you built?

EP: Yes. I don't know who invented the idea--whether I did or who. Our families were so poor that, if we got one simple little item for Christmas, we were fortunate. One of the favorite things that my friends and I had as toys was what we called bottle horses. We used two beer bottles with the little necks and made harnesses out of heavy sack string for them--with single trees and double trees [i.e., harness connectors]. We'd pulled little wagons and bobsleds with them.

I: Were you working from any sort of pattern or model?

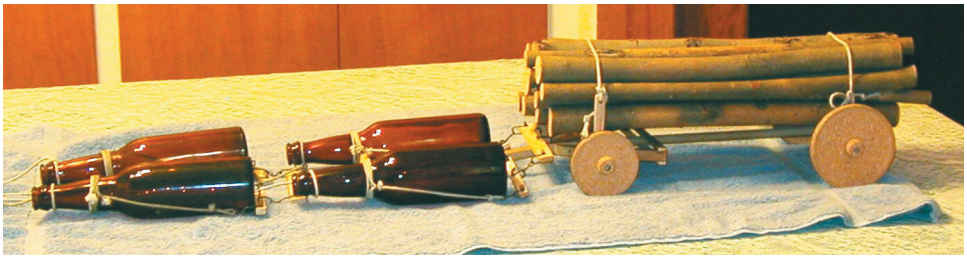
EP: No. I made them up as I went along. I designed and built a swing for small children when I was eight or ten years old. All through my young life we built swings and equipment to haul hay on our little wagons. I learned to make blocks out of wood to build things. I carried that clear down to this day of building blocks that you could put together and build towers or walls or houses with them. Our little great-grandchildren play with them even now.

We built barns, corrals, and mangers for the horses; we fed and took care of them. We worked them hard and made them earn their keep!

Now we live in the disposable world. If it doesn't have a battery, kids aren't interested in it. I've always told my children about the toys I built; as my grandchildren played with them, they told their schoolteachers about them. For years and years, I have made bottle horses and harnesses to take to schools; they asked me to demonstrate in their classes the toys I made. The little kids were fascinated, pulling them all over the classroom. I created

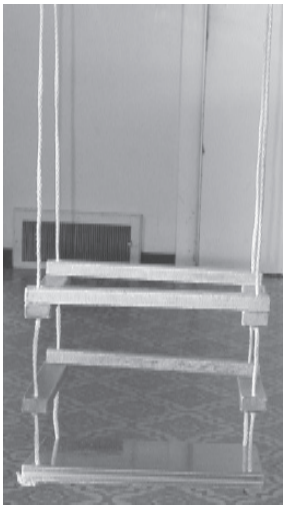
Children's Toys Made by Elmer throughout His Life

Photos by Eugen Smith



Bottle horses and log wagon, made by Elmer Perry in his later years

Closeup of bottle-horse single and double trees (at left)



Swing that suspends from a hook in a doorway

Stick and metal rim for a chasing game

Sled that was pulled by bottle horses

quite a reputation at the schools where I demonstrated.

I: What tools were you using?

EP: A draw knife--a blade that has two handles, used to peel the bark off wood. My brother and I went to the mountains east of Imbler and got three wagon loads of poles. We cut them and made a log cabin when I was a teenager. We built our own wood lathes and he bought some simple tools. That's when I really got started with my hobbies--metalworking and woodworking--that became my life's occupations.

Imbler School Experiences

I: What were some of your school experiences?

EP: We had fun when we went to school. I specialized in shop and in FFA work. We had a strong program with FFA and an excellent teacher, Joe Jarvis, who is still alive. We also had lots of one-act and three-act plays. We had baseball and basketball.

Only day before yesterday we had a reunion of all the graduates from 1920 to 1945--over a hundred people; we do that every two years. We had it out at our old schoolhouse, and it was wonderful. You never saw so much hugging and talking of people from several states--one big family. We have a big dinner. It's wonderful that school spirit is still maintained after all these years. It was the sixty-fourth anniversary of my graduation.

I: What specific memories do you have of how Imbler School looked on the inside when you were a student there?

EP: The first floor was grade school, two grades in each room. We had an assembly hall. Other than a library and a coat closet, that's all there was. The restrooms were in the basement. Classrooms had individual desks with a place to write and a back that served as part of the desk behind.

I: Weren't they connected together by runners?

EP: They could have been on one-by-fours.

I: The janitors liked that because they could clean the room by shooting the mop right down the aisles and under the desks.

EP: Maybe that was true. I hadn't thought about that.

I: Can you remember a typical schedule for a day?

EP: We started school at 9:00 went to 12:00, with a recess between and one hour at noon; we went back to school till four. After school were athletic activities.

I: That hasn't changed a lot. How do you remember the teaching behavior of your elementary school teachers?

EP: They were pretty firm. They maintained discipline. When we sat in our desks, we didn't open our mouths until our hands went up. We didn't leave to go to the restroom until we had permission.

I: How did they teach reading, arithmetic, science, penmanship and all the other subjects?

EP: We were given reading assignments-

reading out loud before the class. I think back when I was in the first and second grade they taught us to read with phonics--sounding out words. That has been a help to me to this day after eighty-three years; I still sound out words and they taught me that in the first grade.

There was one teaching tool that I've never seen any place else--sandboxes. I think that that was one of the most effective tools that I can remember. For about the first four or five grades in every classroom, we had a box six feet one way, eight another, and about six inches deep--filled with sand. It was on legs to make it as high as a table. If we studied about a country like Denmark or Holland, we made lakes in the sand with blue paper under pieces of glass, windmills, and dikes. We went to great lengths to decorate or to build a community or whatever it was in those sandboxes. It was the most fun ---one of the greatest learning instruments that we had. I don't know why teachers don't use them today.

I: We would call it now "hands-on" learning. It's kind of gone out of style, but in the 1930s it was very popular.

Doctors and Health-related Practices

I: What do you recall about seeing a doctor or other aspects of health care?

EP: We had a family doctor, who came to homes on the train or the best way he could get there to deliver babies. But my mother was a midwife and she delivered probably more babies than the doctors did. In the middle of the night, we expcted the doctor's knock on the back door, and I saw her get up and go many times in the middle of the night.

There was a concept among people then about needing fresh air. They built twelve-foot-high ceilings in their houses so they'd get lots of fresh air. My dad was fanatic on it, though I don't understand why. In my brother's and my bedroom there was a door going to the outside, and that door stood open winter or summer to get fresh air. Our fire would go out in our wood stove and snow would drift in the open door. It was so cold that even our two-gallon water bucket in the kitchen froze solid.

We had to have a lot of covers and hot rocks wrapped in paper or cloth at the bottom of the bed. I was glad to have a brother to be able to cuddle up to when I was little. When we got up in the morning, the temperature was the same outside as it was inside. We put kindling in our cook stove the night before so that, when all we had to do was get up, toss a match at it, and crawl back in bed till it began to get warmed up.

I: Besides your brother, did you have sisters?

EP: I had two older sisters and twin sisters, who arrived after I was twelve years old. They are the only ones still alive today; one lives near Salt Lake City, the other in Eugene, Oregon.

Imbler School, 1930s
(in use as elementary school in 2003)
photo courtesy of John Turner and Richard Hermens

We never had inside plumbing. We carried every drop of water, pumping it outside, bringing it in, and heating it on the stove. That was for washing. It was an all day project to wash clothes, using hand washers and wringing them out by hand. I remember my mother washing and hanging the clothes out on cold days when they froze. She had to take them in the house that evening and hang them up on lines above the cook stove to let them dry out.

I: Did you bathe in a tub?

EP: We had a round metal tub. After we put water in, it depended on your seniority who had a bath first. One person took a bath, poured in a little more hot water from the tea kettle, and then somebody else bathed in the same water. Finally, everybody in the family was clean.

I: What about toilets?

EP: These outside restrooms were really something in the winter--wading through snowdrifts, pushing the door open, and scraping six or eight inches of snow off the toilet seat. I never saw a roll of toilet paper until after I was nineteen years old.

I: Did you use the catalog?

EP: The catalog. There's the joke about somebody who wrote to Sears and Roebuck and asked to order some toilet paper. They said, "We need a catalog number." He said, "If we had a catalog, we wouldn't need the toilet paper."

I: How did your mother handle food preservation?

EP: We didn't have pressure cookers, but we did have really good steam cookers. She could put maybe fourteen quarts in, close the little doors, and the food cooked by steam. That's how we were able to preserve our food. Every year we had seven or eight hundred quarts of fruit and vegetables in our cellar that we had bottled.

A Lifelong Inventor

EP: I am an inventor. I've invented quite a few things: hunting equipment, winches and sleds, and many other things. From when I was young, I wanted to figure out easier ways to do things. For example, at Imbler for the animals in the barn we had to carry every drop of water they drank in buckets. We pumped it with the hand pump and carried it clear down to the barn.

I: Drudgery?

EP: I don't know whether I'd call it drudgery, but it was a lot of hard work. When I became a Future Farmer of America, I knew there was an easier way, so I simply got a post-hole digger, drilled a well near the barn, and put a hand pump there. We pumped water right into their watering trough.
I'll give you another example of learning to do things easier. We had big gardens. We picked peas. We went out early at daylight and picked maybe two big washtubs full of peas. Then the whole bunch of us sat all day long, podding peas to be bottled. I did that for many years until I said, "There's gotta be an easier way." So I put my mind to work. We had an old ringer washing machine; I devised a way of running pea pods through that ringer washing machine and having a cloth to catch the peas. I could pod more peas than all the rest of the family put together.

I: Now the trick there, I should think, would be apply just enough pressure so you wouldn't squash the peas.

EP: That's right. My invention rolled them right out.

I: Did you have to feed the pod in at just the right angle?

EP: Yes, but even so we got to where we could feed several at a time.

I: Did it catch on? Did a lot of other people start doing that?

EP: Not that I know of.

I: You didn't advertise?

EP: No. I left home a few years later.

I: Your own family didn't continue doing it?

EP: My wife and I did it when we moved to La Grande in '46.

When I was in high school, I built a trailer for my family and four-wheel trailer to haul hay on. And when I moved from Utah to here, I bought an old car, took the body and engine off, and made a four-wheel trailer in order to move all of our household.

I: Were these actual inventions or remodeling?

EP: I took an old car and put a tongue and steering mechanism on it. I designed all of it.

As an adult, I developed from scratch a sacrament-tray filler for the thirty-six glasses per tray that are used in the sacrament.

I: There was an example of seeing what you thought was a need that had to be done more quickly or more efficiently and there was nothing other than pouring it by hand. That's clearly an invention.

EP: Right. It fills eighteen glasses at once and automatically stops when the water level is exactly right. There are three thousand of these fillers used throughout the L.D.S. churches.

I: You started with essentially nothing but a need.

EP: When the folks at Brigham Young University learned about this water glass filler, they asked me to develop a big water-glass filler for their everyday drinking glasses. Their banquets sometimes involved fice thousand people at a time. I made one that filled fifty-six water glasses at one time; they slid a trayful of glasses under the filler and pushed a lever. "Chhhhhh" and it filled all of them.

They also wanted me to do one to fill their punch glasses. That required a lot different sort of thing because you had to have a reservoir to put the punch in. So I made one that could fill fifty-six punch glasses at one time. They used it for years.

Both of those units were from scratch.

I: Have you patented any of your inventions?

EP: Not the toys but I did patent the water-glass filler.

I've invented game sleds that fold up to suitcase size. If hunters carry them, they can drag in an elk or deer by opening up the sled and tying the carcass to it.

I made a winch for a tote goat--a little, slow speed motorcycle that is no longer made. You could climb a telephone pole almost. We used to haul deer on it and, by tying the tote goat to a tree, running a cable a thousand feet down a canyon, tying it to an elk, and pulling the body right out of the canyon, using the power from the tote goat.

I've built splitters designed to split wood and a winch to drag logs.

I: Other people must have heard about and been interested in these inventions. Did you make multiple copies for use by other people?

EP: Very few. Most were one-time things for my own use and satisfaction. But for the Brigham Young water-glass filler, I made a sample as a commercial filler for restaurants. I can't remember how many glasses it filled, but it was the same size rack as they used in their dishwashers. I come this close to having a personal interview with a Marriott Hotels representative; I wanted to see if I could get this in their restaurant business. Unfortunately, that interview fell through, but I still have the prototype in my basement. I made a decision not to pursue the commercial end because it would divert me from building sacrament fillers for the Church.

Whenever there's a need for something, I just build it. The latest thing I made is a gadget to dig gophers up at our family campout. I made that this week.

A Lifelong Hunter

I: You've been a hunter, I gather.

EP: I didn't get started until I was about twelve--hunting birds and rabbits out in the orchards. I started hunting legally when it was time to go deer and elk hunting.

I: Do you think attitudes have changed about hunting or remained about the same over the past century?

EP: Oh, they have changed completely. The original purpose of hunting was to get food for the winter. Now it's just a sport. Too many people go trophy hunting, and there's too much poaching.

I: And the meat means nothing to them?

EP: No. At a reunion, I heard some of the old-timers talking about how they lived. The only meat they grew up on was wild meat, and a lot of it was illegally killed out of season. But it was a survival thing during the Depression.

Memories of Native Americans in the Grande Ronde Valley

I: What do you know about Indians' being in the Grande Ronde Valley?

EP: I've had some first-hand experience with that. This Grande Ronde Valley for many, many years was a rendezvous for all the tribes around Washington, Idaho, and Oregon. They came here every spring and summer for hunting, fishing, and drying what they caught. They also picked huckleberries, if there were any, and dry them. When I was young, right up above Mt. Glen, I saw the Indians personally--the squaws and their kids coming over from Umatilla with their horses and things they dragged. I saw them come up Catherine Creek [near Union] and catch the salmon by spearing them.

In the fall, Indian squaws came by our place at Imbler to see if we had any deer and elk hides. We got to where we saved them. If we had two deer skins, they would take them, tan them, and, when they brought them back, give us the choice of which one we wanted. They did a beautiful job of tanning those hides.

I: Were you hearing stories from any of the adults when you were quite young about the relationship between Native Americans and white people?

EP: If the truth were known, I think a lot of the white people looked down on the Indians, sad as it may be.

I: Why do you think that might have been?

EP: A lot of them didn't speak English, and many of them lived in substandard situations. I've never had that feeling towards the Indians. For us LDS members, the Indian people are a very special people because of our belief and knowledge about where they come from. We know where their ancestors come from and how they got here to the American continent, so the Indians have been special to us. Our church has done a lot of work and are still doing it to help Indian people.

I: Apparently you were aware that a number of white people in this area probably were prejudiced against Indians?

EP: I think they could have been.

I: Were you also aware of the fact that people in the Grande Ronde Valley had prejudice about people with black skin or Chinese people?

EP: I think so and that's sad.

I: Did you hear any talk about that?

EP: We talked about Chinatown.

I: What was associated with the talk about Chinatown? That these are inferior people?

EP: They were pretty well all gone when I grew up. But the white Americans took advantage of the Chinese people--worked them like animals.

I: The railroad probably wouldn't have been built without their having done that.

EP: I don't know how to explain it. We had a Chinese noodle place when we were kids. We also saw gypsies when we were living in Imbler and were a little bit afraid that they would come by when our folks were gone and kidnap. They were actually just a group of people who roamed around and begged for food or anything that people would give them.

Speaking of food, we had a small grocery store at the corner in Imbler, but many of the things you needed in everyday life, like salves, we bought from traveling salespeople, like those from Raleigh and Watkins Products. Every so often these men with big suitcases would come to our home and take orders for spices, thread, or whatever we needed. Most of the time they had the items with them--the common things. They laid their heavy cases out on our floor, and there it was--whatever you needed--right before us; we didn't have to go to a store. That went on for many years, and, to a very limited degree, there's still some of that kind of selling.

I: Did they come in cars?

EP: Yes, they were in cars. And that's another thing that I've witnessed: going from the Model-T to the cars that we have today. I owned Model-Ts; I bought the first Model-T coupe that had glass windows in when I was a teenager.

Before cars or trucks, of course, people had to use work animals. When I was just a little boy, my grandmother gave me an ox yoke that my grandfather had made with a set of oxen to haul logs out of Indian Creek. I made the stays of the yoke because they were missing. I made the bows in a U-shape that went around the ox's neck. I still have this ox yoke; it will stay in our family forever because I made a promise to a man that bought my parents' place that, if would let me have it back, I would never sell it.

I: How old is it?

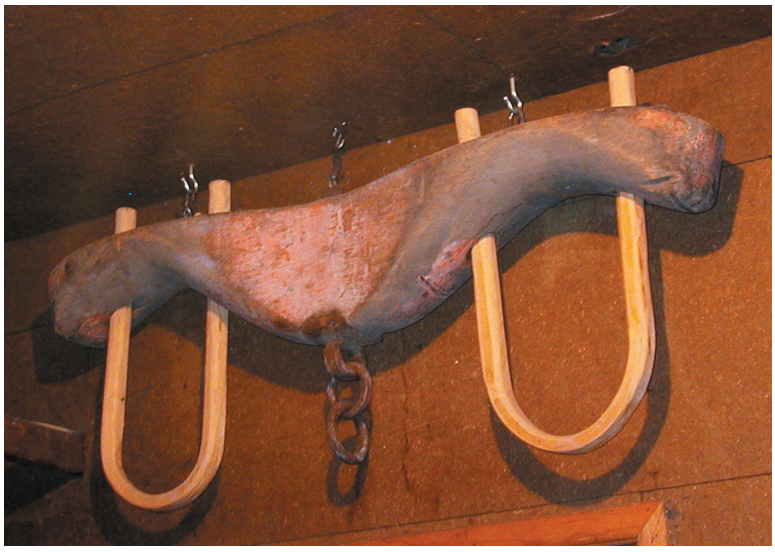
EP: It's over a hundred years old. A millionaire offered to buy it the other day, and I said, "You haven't got enough money to buy it." I still have it and plan to pass it on down. Maybe someday it will be put in the museum.

Apple Growing in Imbler

I: What do you remember about apple growing in Imbler?

EP: The Imbler area was solid with apple trees. That's the way people made their living, planting apple trees when they first came to the valley in 1900. For many years apples were the mainstay of Imbler--different kinds that they shipped all over the United States.

It took all year to raise apples. They spent all winter pruning the trees. When spring came, they had to start spraying, and, when the apples got about as big as a big cherry, they started thinning. They sprayed and cultivated all summer. In the fall they built wooden boxes, picked the apples and hauled them to warehouses, where they ran them over graders, then sorted, wrapped, and packed. Every apple was wrapped in a piece of paper and very methodically laid in a box.



100+-year-old ox yoke that was used in timber harvests by Elmer's grandfather and that Elmer restored
Photo by Eugene Smith

I: Did you make cider, too?

EP: Oh, yes. Some apples made better cider than others. When we celebrated Halloween with parties and donuts, we always had cider.

Religious Upbringing

I: What is your religious background?

EP: We belong to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. When my ancestors on both sides moved in to the Imbler area, they were a big, extended family, and they created the nucleus for the LDS church in Imbler. For Thanksgiving and for Christmas we always celebrated together at the church. Many of the citizens of the area other than our members came and had Thanksgiving dinner with us and came to Christmas programs.

I think of an interesting little sidelight that shows the misconceptions of many people who didn't belong to our church about the Mormon Church, as it is nicknamed. My mother told how some of the men in the community caught Mormon kids and looked in their hair for horns. They actually believed that Mormons had horns. Maybe they considered them devils because they did have extreme hate for the LDS people. Or maybe they didn't know why. That belief isn't completely eradicated today; it pops up once in a while.

There was so much hate. What I think caused a lot of the early hate was that church members were united in building homes and in standards of living. When an election came up, if it was in the area where there was a majority of members of the church, they could vote one way and enact the law.

I: Maybe it was a combination of fear and resentment?

EP: I think so. From its inception, when the church began to be restored, other people's ignorance of God and his son Jesus Christ was so different from the concept that LDS people had. Joseph Smith, a fourteen-year-old boy, had a vision as an answer to prayer; he saw our Father in Heaven and the son Jesus Christ. When he went out into the world with this new concept that he and his associates were heavenly personages, it was immediately rejected --by ministers particularly, because it was against their teaching.

A few years ago one of the women's clubs in La Grande asked me to come and tell about the early days of the LDS Church in this valley. I went willingly. It was to last about thirty minutes, but it generated enough interest among these ladies that it went on for over an hour and a half. At the close, I asked this question: "Why are so many churches prejudiced against the LDS Church?" One lady said, "They're jealous of you: your beautiful, big building, your welfare program. And they're jealous of the program that you have for your young people." I think that vein of jealousy has caused some of the contention.

I: Has some of the reactions that you've noted throughout your life strengthened your faith?

EP: They just reassured me. We have nothing to hide. We have sixty thousand missionaries all over the world at all times, telling people. I went on a mission to Texas for two years when I was nineteen and twenty. I'm willing to tell about the church to anybody that wants to know. We feel that we have

something to offer everybody. I am very proud to be a member.

The LDS Church has been very strong in the Imbler community and in the valley. Probably ten percent of the entire valley are members of the church. To this day, many of our LDS people are prominent in the school system, the judicial system, the police system, in the business world--some successful businesses owned by members of our church.

Becoming a Builder/Contractor

I: Tell me how you got started in the building business.

EP: I went to college to learn metalwork before World War II started.

I: Which college?

EP: Weber College in Ogden, Utah. During the war, I worked for the Army Air Force doing metalwork as a machinist and tool maker. After the war was over, there wasn't a need for that, but I had a permanent Civil Service appointment at the air base in Utah. There was really no work to do there; I wasted time for over six months. I said to myself, "I cannot spend the rest of my life wasting time and doing nothing." So I moved back to La Grande, even though it was contrary to my nature and disposition of wanting to be secure. That's when I took up building.

I: Had it been in your mind since you were a young boy that you probably would be a builder the rest of your life?

EP: No, because metalwork was my first love.

I: What was the attraction of coming back to La Grande?

EP: Our church had taught us all through our lives to be secure, to have a home, to have property where you can raise gardens. My wife and I bought an acre and a quarter of land next to my brother's place here in La Grande. Since we had it nearly paid for when the war was over, we decided it was home and to come back. It seemed like it was meant to be.

The first thing I did was to start a home of our own. I did that for several months. When I ran out of money and had to go back to work, I started to do carpenter work. People started to ask me to do building for them--small jobs. I did work for Miller's Cabinet Shop for about a year; my brother worked there, and I learned many things when I worked there--building door and window frames, screen doors, and kitchen cabinets, among other things. Learning those techniques was a real blessing.

A little later a man asked me to build his home. I did much of the planning for a lot of the homes.

I: Did you talk with the prospective residents to find out what they needed and then come up with the plan?

EP: That's right. I didn't draw very efficient plans, but, if I knew the size of the house, their floor plan, and the type of roof and windows they wanted, then I could go from there. A lot of people got magazine plans, though they weren't full-fledged plans. Some people sent for a set of blueprints.

I: What kind of a financial arrangement did you usually make with those people?

EP: Most of the houses I built I did for time and material.

I: You had a standard rate on time?

EP: So much an hour.

I: Did you typically have a couple of helpers?

EP: During the thirty years I was building, I had three to five people helping.

I: Were you doing a lot of the work yourself?

EP: I worked every hour of the day.

I: Did you have subcontractors?

EP: Yes. We had to. When I built my own home, I did my own wiring and plumbing, but I wasn't permitted to do that in other people's homes.

I: Were you using subcontractors from within the valley?

EP: Yes.

I: Who were some of them?

EP: There were different electrical companies. Lou Buckley was an electrician. I used Allen Electric later on. I've almost forgotten who they were. Zweifel did most of our plumbing. Parker Sheet Metal put in a lot of our furnaces.

I: Did you develop some kind of a predictable time limit for building a certain kind of house?

EP: When we started a house we stayed on it until we finished it. We didn't job hop, though sometimes we had two going at once. We didn't start one job, work on another for a week, and then come back to the first one. I never liked that. If we couldn't put a completion time limit on a job and tell people that we would be there, we asked them if they wanted to wait, but we didn't make a promise and then not be there.

I: What would be a typical amount of time it would take to build an average sized house--maybe three bedrooms, living room, dining room, kitchen, basement, and garage?

EP: Probably four months. We stayed on it--from the footings to the finished product, ready to move into.

I: Was your typical work season from about March or April through October?

EP: We worked year round.

I: How did you do that with snow?

EP: Good management.

I: Explain that.

EP: I built this house [where Elmer and Helen Perry live] and one up on the hill at the same time. We tried very hard to get a structure up to the square and the roof on it before winter set in. When we had the windows and doors in, we could build a fire and work inside the rest of the winter, doing the finishing and the cabinetry.

I: Did you bring in a temporary stove?

EP: We had a wood stove that we could warm it with. Sometimes we built a fireplace first and could burn trash to take the chill off. We didn't need it at seventy-two degrees when we were working.

I: Were you typically building two at a time?

EP: Not always. If it was a large home, we worked just on it.

I: I wonder whether you could keep a crew busy throughout the winter if you were only building one or two houses.

EP: Our men rarely missed a day's work in all those years. I had a lot of inside remodel jobs. We were blessed. I feel that we had a good reputation because we always had jobs waiting.

I: What did you call your company?

EP: Perry Builders.

I: When did you officially start that company?

EP: In the late '40s.

I: Perry Builders doesn't exist now, does it?

EP: No.

I: When did you stop?

EP: I stopped building houses in 1975. As a contractor for thirty years, I built over a hundred big homes and about that many more big remodel jobs--up and down Adams Avenue. I built churches and commercial buildings. Some of the guys that worked for me wanted to continue the Perry Builders name, but I said no because I had certain ethical standards that I wasn't sure would be carried on.

I: As you think about the houses you've built in Union County, are there two or three that you are most pleased with?

EP: Yes. One of them is the biggest home I built. I built it for the Beezing brothers, two old bachelor farmers. I designed the big homes myself; that was one of the fun parts.

I: Did you ever build one that would be called the Victorian style?

EP: I never built one of those.

I: It sounds as though you were more influenced by recent ideas in building.

EP: That's right. You can go around town

The Beezing house on Sunset Drive, designed by Elmer Perry--the largest house built by Perry Builders
Photo by Eugene Smith

and almost tell the time period that the houses were built in.

I: If you stayed in business till 1975, you changed a number of your building techniques, didn't you, with the availability of power tools and other kinds of shortcuts?

EP: We built a lot of houses before we even had a skill saw.

I: You were doing it all with hand saws?

EP: All with hand saws--sawed all the rafters, floor joists, and studs by hand. I never did own a nail gun. We drove all of our own nails.

I: Would you claim that the use of power tools in any way detracts from the quality of workmanship?

EP: I don't think so. It would enhance it actually.

I: It's hard to get a really straight cut with a hand saw even if you're a good, experienced user of a saw.

EP: You can't do it as well as with a power saw. The hand saw was very workable, but slow, so slow. For many years we mixed all of our own concrete with little hand mixers. That is quite different from having a big truck pull up and dump it.

I: Did you use rebar in the foundations?

EP: Some, but not to the extent that they do now.

I: Did you get most of your supplies locally?

EP: That's one thing I endeavored to do--to buy locally. Only when people insisted did I let them go maybe to Portland to buy their plumbing materials.

I: Did you ever think that it necessary to do advertising?

EP: That's an interesting question. I did very little advertising. I remodeled a livestock-sale yard on the road to Union. Every week they have sales. People come from all over, hundreds of buyers. All over their arena were big signs for advertising. After I did all that work, they wanted me to buy a sign. I did. It cost me $500 or $600 to have that sign painted. Interestingly enough, I never got one telephone call as a result of that sign.

I: That you know about.

EP: I know the sources of the other jobs.

I: Nobody mentioned having seen the sign?

EP: Never noticed. The best advertisement that anybody can have is satisfied customers. That's what we endeavored to do. When we finished a new big building or commercial building, there were things in the newspaper advertising the contractor and the subcontractors. I always bought a spot in the paper when we did that. The slogan I used all through my business years was, "If you are not satisfied, tell us, and if you are, tell others." Whenever I did advertise, I always used that slogan.

We built the former Social Security building at Fourth and Main in the late 1960s for developers and to specifications of the federal government. It's a standard block building--pumice block, principally. I had five or six men on the crew at that time; construction started in the spring and was completed in less than six months. I like variation in the kinds of buildings I built, but houses were my druthers.

A Guided Tour of Several Perry Builders Remodels in Downtown La Grande from the 1960s

Guide: Elmer Perry

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Photo by Eugene Smith

The former Liberty Theater is on Adams Avenue, next to City Hall. The owner, Francis Gruelich, wanted to put in storefronts after the theater business kind of went to pot. It had sloping floors, so one of the first things we did in 1961 was to level the floors. The stores were to go back as far as the stage. Originally, the theater had a lot of stage entertainment. Then we had to lower the ceiling; the theater had a balcony, which made the ceiling high. The balcony is still there; we bypassed it and lowered the ceiling down to a workable height. We didn't tear out any of the basic building, though we tore out all the pulleys and ropes. I have some of the old rope to this day. Coast to Coast Stores was one of the first tenants.

Photo by Eugene Smith

Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

The old Star Theater on Adams Avenue was there when I was little. It burned twice; we did a lot of remodel work and updating before the second fire, which was in the late 1960s, and remodeled again after that. Compared to the Liberty job, it was dirty. We had to clean all the burned part and put back parts that had burned. The finished floor and the seats were destroyed. We put in new restrooms and counters where they serve refreshments.

At the site of this building on Fir, there was an old, empty building. The owners wanted a good store building; I worked with them and built what they needed. It's a fairly simple building.

Photo by Eugene Smith

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