Roy Comstock edited

Comstocks Come to Cove

RC: My name is Roy Comstock and I was born in Cove in 1922. There were six of us kids in the family; five of us were born at home. My oldest sister was born in South Dakota and was just a baby when my parents moved here.

I: Why and when did your parents move here?

RC: They came from South Dakota in 1911. They'd heard Oregon was a great place and South Dakota wasn't the greatest place in the world to farm.

My great-uncle Ansel Comstock came here first, he used to live where Charlie Swart lives now. My Dad had always been a farmer and he and my grandfather moved out here either in 1911 or '12. My dad had punched cows in South Dakota when he was a young man for my great-uncle Ansel. Dad bought the ranch when they moved out here.

I: Did the ranch have a name?

RC: Just the Comstock place. I think the road up there's named Comstock Road. The house has been remodeled two or three times. (It's where Moores live now.)

I: Your father built the house?

RC: No, he added onto the house that was already there. My father put running water in the house - it was the first thing he did - and got electricity from the old Eastern Oregon Light and Power Company. Dad owned the line from the Mill Creek Road into his house for years. He had to maintain the poles.

I: What do you mean by 'maintain'?

RC: He had to get new poles anytime they were needed. He dug the holes and the power company put the poles in the ground. For years we owned that line and then the power company took it over but I don't know what year that was.

I: Tell me a little about your family.

RC: Well, there were six in the family: three boys and three girls. I was the last to be born and the only one still alive.

I: What do you remember about your early childhood?

RC: Well, it was a happy childhood, it really was. All of us worked on the farm, we had all these milk cows and a large garden, as well as berries. Dad cut wooden posts to sell. In those days living was a lot different than it is nowadays.

I: How so?

RC: Money was hard to come by, especially when the Depression hit in 1928 and 1929; I remember when I was eight or nine there was just no money. We always had plenty to eat because we raised our own food. We had cows and chickens – always had a lot of chickens – and we sold eggs. Everybody had cows and sold cream.

There were three cream routes that came from Cove in those days. There was a co-op in Union, there was the Blue Mountain Creamery over in La Grande, and both made butter. There was an independent creamery that came in and they shipped their product down to Portland. So everybody who had a place had a cow or two, or up to two dozen.

I: How do you remember the Depression affecting your neighbors, or the community as a whole?

RC: In those days maybe we would go to La Grande once a week to buy groceries and take the eggs in; my Dad sold the eggs in La Grande. We didn't have money and we didn't go into La Grande to see a show or things like that. They did have a show house at Cove at one time, right near where the tavern is now.

Early Industries in Cove

There were a lot of businesses in Cove in the early days. They had many sawmills.

I: What kinds of sawmills?

RC: They produced lumber that they sold to farmers and local people. There was the Barging Mill that was up on the way to Moss Springs, but it closed down. There was the Waite Mill. In later years, Clark Sharp and another guy built a mill at the end of Comstock Road, right below Clifford Toll's along Mill Creek. That burned down and then they rebuilt that. John Edwards had an operating mill there and it burned down.

There was one in Cove as well; it used to sit right where the gymnasium is now. They had remodeled it and then they tore it down. The school bought that piece of property.

There was another mill on Burt Hill's place. I think the building is still there or maybe they tore it down.

I remember when my dad sold his first logs off the place up there. I'm talking about trees that were old growth timber. As I remember, he got three dollars a thousand board feet for the pine, and for the white fir it was less.

I: Now it is how much?

RC: For good pine now, it is over six hundred dollars per thousand board feet. They started using the logs to make the railroad ties.

I: Did they make railroad ties for all over NE Oregon or just locally?

RC: They had a contract I think with Union Pacific. The railroad ties were the reason they put the mill in. Of course they sold other lumber because there is always some lumber left over besides the ties. They wanted fir and tamarack for cord wood. A cord of wood cost from three to five dollars and that's pretty much in line with a thousand board feet of lumber.

I: What else was happening in Cove?

RC: They had a freight line here in Cove at one time, down right there where the drive-in is now. The Weimers opened a freight line. There were two packing-houses and two prune dryers in Cove. There was a shingle mill and a box factory in Cove.

I: What is a box factory?

RC: They made little boxes. Down there right across from the tavern, there was a long building that had the post office and a meat market at one time. Charlie Williams had what we called a 'Knothole Factory'. They hired ten or twelve women to make novelty items and they sold them there in that building. Of course we always had a barber shop here.

I: They called it the Knothole Factory?

RC: That's what the locals called it. You ask any of the old-timers where the Knothole Factory was and they will point it out to you.

I: It was just little novelties, craft-like things?

RC: Crafts and other stuff. Charlie was kind of an inventor. I don't have any of his stuff, but some people around here still have some of it.

Cove had a harness shop. Everybody had to have a harness. Ron Puckett's granddad, Huble Blank, had a harness shop here before he was a janitor at the school.

There used to be a bank in Cove and there was a flourmill, part of the building is still here. It was south of the post office, where they're making camp stoves or something like that in there.

I: It sounds like there was a lot of industry here in Cove, when did things start to change?

RC: Cars changed it. It went from horse and buggy to mechanized vehicles, easy access to transportation. La Grande began to have jobs. In the early days there was nobody who worked in La Grande from here. All of a sudden people began to commute to La Grande to work; cars, of course opened things up n a great deal.

I can remember when the old gym down here was built. The Macabee Hall used to sit down north of the post office right where Arlene Goodson lives, but it burned down.

I: What was it used for?

RC: It was small, but that's where they played basketball. After it burned, Carl Stackland who owned this place, a packinghouse and several other places, was the main driving force to get the gym built. (He had shipped a lot of cherries out of Cove.) It was built for seven or eight thousand dollars. I must've been in about the second or third grade when this took place.

I: So Mr. Stackland built the old gym?

RC: He was the instigator of getting it going. The Rundle brothers did a lot of work on it as well as local carpenters.

I: Did cars come into the community before the Depression?

RC: Oh yes, Dad always had a car. I remember the Model T he owned because it used to have a magneto, and I remember him trying to get it started when the weather was cold, and the old isinglass curtains on the side.

Then Dad bought a brand new car, I think it was a Model it cost $550.00.

I: Anything else?

RC: The saloon came in after Prohibition. I guess they had a saloon in the early days and then Prohibition came and it was closed down.

When I was in the sixth grade they built a new schoolhouse down here. We went to school in what was then the bank building. They moved the kids all over the

Cove to go to school, the fifth and sixth grades went had classes in the bank building, and that was right on the corner where the tavern is now.

I remember they had the first beer garden after Prohibition and it was right where the post office is. The **?helms** opened that up. At one time the building was a drugstore. For many, many years Lynn Chadwick had a meat market right where the hair salon is now.

Cove had two grocery stores, Bill Hallmark's is where the firehouse sits now and then the building across the street was a grocery store when I was a kid, **??** owned that store. They were both open at the same time and had pretty much the same groceries for sale.

RC: When I was in grade and high school they always had a pool hall in Cove. There was another building right there where the firehouse is now and that was the pool hall for years and years. Finally, it fell down or was closed down or something. Bill Hallmark's grocery store went out of business and they opened a pool hall there that operated for many years, above the firehouse on the corner there.

I: I would imagine that the Depression hurt the local businesses.

RC: It hurt everybody.

I: But also you said that the transportation changed life in Cove, which came first?

RC: Boise Cascade ended up buying the buildings out here in Cove and they closed it down. There was a fire that took one mill and it was never rebuilt. The jobs were in La Grande. The railroad used to be a thriving industry.

I: So what do you think affected local businesses, was it the popularity of cars, or was it the Depression?

RC: The Depression is really before the car deal. During the Depression people had cars, but they used them differently than they do now. We didn't just jump in the car and go from here to there, to a ballgame or something. When I played in high school, we didn't have a school bus, so local people helped drive kids to the games. Generally the coach would take a car and depending on how many kids -- the first team and second team, or JV -- there would be three or four additional cars that went. Some of the business people, Bill Hallmark and Tom Toll would take kids to games as well.

I: So people in the community who had cars would drive the teams around?

RC: We always went in a car. When we came back from a ballgame in Enterprise or up the branch, we'd get home late around twelve or one o'clock and they'd let us down at the gym and we all walked home from there.

Sometimes in the winter I had to go home and milk the cows and help do the chores. If we had ball practice that night then, we had to go back to school to practice after we had done our chores.

I: Tell me a little about the flourmill here in Cove?

RC: I think economic times and transportation stopped the flourmill. In the early days they shipped flour on the railroad. The railroad closed down. They had abandoned the route, and farmers then had to rely on trucks for their freight. I think the economic times were probably what put the flourmill out.

I: Do you remember when mill closed down?

RC: They were still selling grain there and doing some business in 1935, but I don't know how much flour he was making.

Grover's brother Ben, ran the flour mill. It's right across from the post office, south across Mill Creek, part of the building is still there. In the early days the mill ran on waterpower. Mill Creek ran into Mill Pond and they had a pipe going down to the waterwheel that ground their grain into flour.

There was also a mill in Island City that sold flour. I remember going to the flourmill here with my dad, buying what they call mill feed. It was a by-product of making flour and we would feed it to the chickens.

I: Why did the railroad quit?

RC: Probably not enough profit; Cove didn't have enough freight to sustain the railroad. They shipped flour and cherries in season. I don't know what else.

I: Did they ship lumber?

RC: I don't know. They didn't have a mill connected to rail branch. The lumber would have had to been hauled with a team to the rail line. They did load cherries and prunes, but these were very seasonal. After the railroad closed down, the fruit was packed in boxes and hauled over to La Grande. There they would load the boxes into an ice car and ship them out.

SCHOOL

I: What do you remember about school?

RC: I started in the first grade when I was six. My first grade teacher was Thelma Anderson, whose dad, Logood Anderson, was the postmaster. Thelma Anderson was my first and second grade teacher. Eva Duncan was the third and fourth grade teacher.

I: You had two grades together?

RC: There were always two grades together until I graduated. Even after the new schoolhouse was built they had two grades together. In the fifth and sixth grade, I had Stella Edvalson from Union as my teacher. Mrs. Mills was the seventh and eighth grade teacher. She was an excellent teacher and taught many, many years at Cove. The Mills had a farm just a half-a-mile above the schoolhouse, straight up the hill. (It's where Bob Moxley lives now.) My first year in the new school house was seventh grade.

I: What was it like being in the schoolhouse?

RC: It was brand new! We thought it was great.

I: Did it seem to affect how the students conducted themselves, being in a new building?

RC: No. I don't think that that made any changes. We played out on the playground just like they do now, softball and other games . In the wintertime we played Fox and Geese, a game that is kind of like tag in the snow.

I: What was it like having two grades together? Did some of the older students help the younger students?

RC: No. When one side was reciting, the teacher would give lessons to the other side, maybe math or reading, or studying your spelling. It was common practice in all of the schools. There were one-room schoolhouses with all eight grades, but I never went to one of those. They did have those out in the valley as well as the Shanghai School here in the outskirts of Cove and the Lower Cove School.

I: Why is it called Shanghai?

RC: I don't know, but the building is still there. I think there are some people around here who went to the Shanghai school. John Van Schoonhoven told me he went to school there. I always went here to the Cove school. There were no buses; we kids either walked to school or Dad would take us sometimes. In the wintertime we'd even ride on a sleigh with a team.

In high school I rode a horse in the wintertime and tied it up in a barn there on the corner, right across from where Carol Richardson lives now. There was a red barn that Al Puckett owned and he let me keep my horse in the barn. We were friends with him. Now people can't even imagine what it was like, but on a weekend and most weekdays it'd be from ten to thirty teams going up this road into the mountains to get wood.

I: Everyday in the wintertime?

RC: In the winter when they had snow sleds. Of course, Saturdays and Sundays were a great time for kids in Cove. They had their hand sleds and hook a ride behind one of those teams going up the road. You'd go as far as you wanted to go up and then you could coast all the way down. It got icy because it was very steep and slick. Many times on the hill you'd have thirty, forty kids on the weekend, sleigh-riding. Sometimes we'd get together at night after we got older and have a sleigh-riding party.

I: What road did they slide down?

RC: The one we used to call the dump yard road, the one going up to Barrel Springs. Where the red barn is on the corner, from there on up. We even went up the other way as well. Both roads were used for hauling wood.

Barrel Springs actually had a barrel holding spring water and that's the reason it was called Barrel Springs. The other one was Moss Spring Road. Both of these roads were used for hauling wood.

I: What was your sports equipment like?

RC: We had the same equipment, but not as much, especially in football. We had jerseys, pads, a pair of pants, shoes, a helmet, but we had no facemask. I played on the ball field down where the Cove Sportsman Club is now.

I think when I was a junior, the school board bought that piece of ground where the ball field is now. There were willows and a creek ran down through the center of that. Conley's brought their D8 Cat up and leveled and cleared it out. Every time we would play, we would have to pick up brush and rocks and stuff off the field. It wasn't grass, just rocks and brush. My knees were always skinned up from hitting those rocks. I played quarterback and running back; always had my knees skinned up.

I: Did most of the boys participate in sports?

RC: Pretty much everyone. It's just like now, you always had a kid that didn't play. Generally most all of them played basketball. We had a pretty good turnout.

I: What about baseball? What was the equipment like then?

RC: There were no helmets and we had about three bats and three or four balls. It's just like now. Cove had uniforms when I played.

The Big Burn

I: Tell me about the Big Burn.

RC: I don't know what year the burn was, but this country all burned up. That area was known as the Big Burn; they got wood out of that Big Burn for years and years.

I: Was it a forest fire?

RC: Yes, it started off south of here. My dad helped fight on it. It was starting to go off towards Union. It came through this whole country. It used to be you could see all the dead trees, but now a lot of people here don't even know what we're talking about when we mention the Big Burn.

I: So started in Union and it went through up above here?

RC: It started south of Union up near High Valley someplace way up in there and came clear through above here, near Barrel Springs.

It went even up to the summit up Moss Springs, South Mill Creek Canyon. There are still some scars, but it's pretty well all grown in. Any of the old-timers would know what I'd be talking about.

In that same area we had –I was in high school then –a 4-H Club working in forestry. We went up with Alvin Orton and some others. Alvin was a mail carrier here for years, as well as the 4-H leader, and we went up and planted some trees up in there.

I: What other things did the forestry club do?

RC: We had meetings and campouts. One time I remember he took us to fish on the Little Minam and we camped out.

I: Now when did the forest fire happen? Do you remember?

RC: I don't; it was before I was born. I think it was – and don't hold me to this – but I think it was around 1919.

The old black pine trees were still good for years after that. There were a lot of dead tamaracks that stood there. They hauled thousands of cords of wood out of there, I mean literally thousands over the years from that fire. Every winter we'd get wood up on that place. One year -- it was the year I graduated from high school in1941 – Dad had over a hundred cords of wood cut in the wintertime, and I think he paid a dollar a cord to have it cut. Before I left here in the fall of 1941, Dad and I got that wood out and sold if for $3.50 to $5.00 a cord delivered. Now it's a hundred-some dollars a cord.

Service and Flight School Years 1941-46 Outside of Union County

I: You said you left in '41. Did you go into the service then?

RC: No. Everybody at that time knew war was coming. I'd saw this ad in the paper about working in an aircraft school; I wrote a letter, got reply and went to school in Los Angeles. I was an eighteen year-old kid who got on the train and went to L. A. not knowing a soul there.

The people at the school met me and I went to live in a rooming house. The school wasn't very much. Dad and Mother were quite skeptical about the whole thing, but it turned out all right. In the rooming house I got to be friends with the people who ran it. I asked for a job for my board and room. After I was there a few days, I washed dishes every morning before I'd go to school. This happened for a week or ten days. One day the owner came by said, "Good morning, tomorrow morning you come and eat breakfast with me." I said, "I won't have my dishes done by then." He said, "Don't worry about dishes, you're not doing them anymore." So I went and ate breakfast with him, and from then on I just kind of followed him around and inspected. He took a liking to me and I didn't have to wash dishes any more, and I still got my board and room.

I: What did you learn in school?

RC: I got a job at Consolidated Aircraft in San Diego making B-24 bombers. I don't know when I went to work there, but I was there in San Diego till January of '42 when my older brother passed away. I came home and I never went back. I was supposed to go back, but I didn't.

I: What kept you here?

RC: I didn't stay here. I went over to Pendleton to a crash course in welding, then I went down to Portland, to Swan Island, and worked in the Kaiser shipyard making the liberty ships. In July of '42 I enlisted as a naval cadet, D5 program. I stayed there until I was called in September. I actually started out here in La Grande flying cubs. We lived in the old Foley house right across from Montgomery Ward. The government had taken over the place and established

what they called a CPT program, civilian pilot training. I got my primary license flying cubs. We went from there to the college where we also took classes.

I: At Eastern Oregon University?

RC: Yes.

I: Now you said that they had a training place in La Grande?

RC: Yes, La Grande.

I: So there were other people around who came for training?

RC: They came from all over. Some of them came from Portland. In that program, there were some from the Army and some from the Navy. The funny part of the that, we Navy people got $75 in pay per month, and the Army people weren't getting anything. Later on, they did get a lot more Army men in and they eliminated the Navy program. From there I went to Prineville for a secondary license.

I: Then you were sent to Prineville?

RC: We actually went to Madras for secondary licenses, we were flying Steermens then.

Just the living conditions where we were staying in the Madras Hotel were horrible. A bunch of us were downstairs and the sewer conditions were so terrible they moved us. They closed the place down – I don't know whether they condemned it – but it just got so bad that we moved to Prineville.

I was still in secondary, hadn't finished the thing, when I was called down to the Navy pre-flight school at St. Mary's, California. So I went from Prineville to St. Mary's. I was in the E5 program, a Naval aviator.

I: Did you meet Ruth while you were growing up here in Cove?

RC: Oh no, that was many years afterwards.

I: Where did you meet Ruth?

RC: Down in Pensacola, Florida.

I: So you're in the E5 program and they sent you to St. Mary's Pre-Flight School in California.

RC: Yes, St. Mary's College. After I finished that, I went to Navy Primary training, flying the old Yellow Perils, the N3N's. I went to Los Alamedas in California to a primary base there, during which time, they closed that base and made it an operational base for the Navy planes. Then I was transferred to Dallas, Texas. I went from the cool sea breeze to 105 degrees almost overnight. It was terrible. It was so hot in the summertime. I finished Primary at Dallas and some of the men there went on to Corpus Christi, but I was fortunate and went to Pensacola, Florida. I went through all the Navy schools there and that is where I met Ruth on a blind date before I'd got commissioned. In fact, she pinned the wings on me when I got commissioned, got my wings.

I: How did it happen? Did they send you the wings and you said, "Here, you can put them on me"?

RC: No, it happened on a stage, full of ceremony. It was pouring down rain.

RC: They had a ceremony for all the graduating commissioned officers. From there, I went to Jacksonville, Florida flying SBD's, a dive bomb plane. After I finished up I was shipped out to the Marine base at El Toro, California. When I was commissioned, I transferred into the Marine Corp. They had a program so that some of us could transfer into naval service of the Marine Corp. Some of the ones I went to school with would be Navy ensigns and I was a second lieutenant.

I: So you started out in the Navy and ended up in the Marine Corp?

RC: Yes, when I got commissioned I went into the Marine Corp.

I: It was through the Navy that you went through flight school and then you were commissioned to the Marine Corp.

RC: When I finished flight school, I was a second lieutenant at Jacksonville, Florida, Cecil Field Air. Then I went to El Toro Marine Base and I practiced dive bombing there till I got my orders to go overseas.

I: When did you find the time to marry Ruth?

RC: After I'd been over seas and flew my term, I came back on leave.

I: How long were you overseas flying and where did you go?

RC: I was on this little island, Amaru, in the South Pacific for a while and then after the invasion of the Philippines, we flew our planes up there. It took us six days to fly get there. We flew behind a DC3 which had a flying boat to pick up any

stragglers or anybody that had gone down. I was on the invasion of _??_. After, I flew down to invade Mindanao and Jambawango. I was on both invasions there.

I: How long were you away doing all that?

RC: Fourteen months, through eighty-five missions.

I: Now during this time did you have any chance to correspond with your family?

RC: We wrote letters.

I: What was their impression? Did they see your initial move to L. A.?

RC: Do you mean to start with? Of course then, we weren't in the war until December 7th. In fact, I was watching a pro football game in San Diego, when at half time– it was the San Diego Bombers against L. A. – a lot of the San Diego players never came back out and nobody could figure out why. About the time the newspapers hit the stands, the headlines were that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. Of course, I didn't know where Pearl Harbor was. What was Pearl Harbor? All the Marine personnel were immediately called back to the base there and that's why they didn't come out.

I: You said that your parents were initially skeptical of you going down there to the flight school.

RC: Well, there weren't many good paying jobs. I guess there were local jobs, farm jobs, in 1941, but there wasn't any industry. I just knew I wanted to do something, I didn't have money really for college and that was the way I thought I could get ahead.

I: Tell me some more about your missions.

RC: We could only say so much because everything was censored. In fact, pictures you sent home were censored with a stamp. Of course we officers could've said more than we did, but we weren't supposed to. We could say where we were and what we were doing. My family knew I was on bombing missions and they knew I was a pilot and on strikes, but they didn't know where. The news coverage was not like it is now. We didn't have television. They had the radio, but they didn't know I was on the invasion of the Philippines until they begin to get letters from there.

They would have news clippings, but by then I had been away for two years. All the people I knew were in the service at that time. It was all-out war.

I: Did they tell you much about how it affected the community to have their young men leave?

RC: Yes. When I came home on leave before I went overseas, there was sugar rationing, a meat ration, tires and gasoline rationing. On the farm you'd get a little more. Of course, we had most our meat from the farm so you didn't worry about that. Butter was rationed. When I came home on leave the first time they'd give servicemen so many gallons of gas. I can't remember whether I got eight, ten or fifteen gallons of gas, but it wasn't much. However, the only place we'd go would be La Grande.

I: Because your family had their own food?

RC: Living on the farm we always had meat, eggs, all the vegetables and fruit. So the only thing you had to buy really was staples like sugar and flour and they were rationed.

I: What kinds of jobs did you have when you were younger?

Summer jobs

RC: When I was I was kid I remember we always had a big berry patch. We raised strawberries and picked them into twenty-four cup boxes and packed them into what we called crates. There were twenty-four cups to a crate. I remember we would sell them for a $1.50 to $2.00 a crate.

Then we got to where we were selling flats of these wonderful strawberries. The store on the corner, Dollar's Corner that George Anderson put there – he found out we had strawberries. I think we got $3.00 a flat; it was wonderful money in those days. That was just for twelve cups.

It was kind of a race to see who could get their berries picked first and get into La Grande ahead of the others; the stores could only take so much.

I: Were there other kinds of fruit you picked when you were a kid?

RC: Oh yes, raspberries and black caps blackberries. We always had two berry patches, King berries and strawberries.

I: King berries being like raspberries?

RC: Raspberries, black caps, and blackberries, yes. A black cap is a black raspberry. A blackberry is bigger and is a blackberry.

Before I was in high school, there was a local lady who wanted some huckleberries, so I went up and picked huckleberries. I'd ride my horse up, get

three gallons of huckleberries and I got a dollar a gallon for them. Now I think they sell for $20 a gallon at least. I thought the $3.00 a gallon was wonderful money.

My first job at haying, I only got a dollar a day. I can remember when we started getting twenty-five cents an hour for farm labor and for a ten-hour day I'd get two-and-a-half dollars.

I: When did they change from paying per day to per hour for farm labor?

RC: About that time, maybe after I was in high school. Of course now it's all hourly. But then, it was a dollar a day.

I: What age did you start doing that type of work?

RC: It was whenever you'd big enough to do it. We grew up and worked on the farm. Some other farmers would think you could work when you were big enough to handle a pitchfork or whatever you were doing. I suppose twelve to fourteen, early high school age. Everybody that milked cows in Cove had a silo, and raised corn. When I was in my senior year, the year I left here, I helped when we traded our labor. Dad and I filled twelve or fourteen silos with corn that year, different ones around.

I: You did just about everything, didn't you?

RC: Yes. We didn't get what you'd call an allowance. We got what we wanted, but we didn't have much money to spend. The money just wasn't there for a long time. I made money doing whatever I could.

I: Did other kids go out and get work?

RC: Yes. Every kid had a trap line for fur in the winter. I don't think there's anybody who does it now, maybe one or two in the whole Union County. You could make money that way.

I: What kind of fur did you trap?

RC: Muskrat and mink. Every kid had his own territory; you just didn't go stomping in on somebody else's place.

I: What would happen if you did?

RC: Well, there'd be a fight.

RC: I had the Mill Creek area up in here. I would get anywhere from as low as fifty cents up to maybe three or four dollars at best on the muskrat. Mink, if you were lucky enough to catch them, were higher priced. I think they would go up around twenty dollars.

I: Do you remember when did kids stop doing that?

RC: I don't know when they stopped trapping.

I: After your time being overseas in the Marine Corp during World War II, you got married to Ruth. Did you get married here in Union County?

RC: Yes, we got married in La Grande. I had met her down in Pensacola, Florida on a blind date. We had written to each other during the war and she came here to La Grande to marry me on one of my leaves.

I: So she came here and lived with your family until you came home?

RC: Yes. My leave was about ten days and then I had to leave again. When I came home the war was still going on.

When we left here after we were married and went back to Cherry Point. We were following an SB2C squadron for the invasion of Japan. If they hadn't have dropped the big one, we would've been in an invasion of Japan with SB2Cs, another dive-bomber. In fact, there it is right up on the wall [pointing to a photo].

I: Once the war was over what brought you back here to Union County?

Instructor's License

RC: It was home. I tried the airlines but there were a hundred thousand pilots for a thousand jobs. I couldn't get on with the airlines, so I got my instructor's license and worked over at the airport here for about a year.

I: What year did you move back to Cove? Do you remember?

RC: Yes, we bought this place in 1949. Dave was born herein the Spring of '49. The house didn't have a toilet when we bought it. The first thing we did was put a bathroom when we moved in.

I: You taught for a year here at the local airport?

RC: Yes, over here at the airport. Then we went back to Tulsa, Oklahoma, to go to school. I already had my instructors rating, and there I got my instrument rating

and aircraft and engine license. Then we moved to Iowa and I worked there for over a year. Our oldest son was born there but the rest of them were born here in La Grande.

I: What brought you back again?

RC: I wasn't making big wages instructing. I got so much an hour and I had to have a lot of students to make a really good living. I got three dollars an hour for dual time and a dollar for solo time. Most of the time I had a guarantee of two hundred dollars a month and that was in 1948. I wasn't making enough money so we moved back in the Fall of 1948 when John was just a baby. In the spring of 1949 we bought this place here in Cove.

I: How did you go from being a flight instructor to a farmer?

RC: I had grown up in a farming family. My dad had fruit and there was fruit on this place. It was available; we were able to get it, with what money that we'd saved and a loan.

I: Were there fruit trees and berries?

RC: We had pears, but pears weren't a very marketable crop. Cherries were marketable. We raised cows, hogs and berries. Besides that, I'd work for Boise Cascade full time. It was a struggle.

I: What did you do for Boise Cascade?

RC: I worked some at the sawmill and then when the particleboard plant opened I got a job as an operator there until I retired. I went to work for Boise from 1966 and retired in '85.

I: On the farm did you raise milk cows or beef cows?

RC: We had both milk and beef cows, and hogs.

I: Did you have some help on the farm?

RC: Oh yes. Some of the kids out of high school worked on the farm, but money was always hard to come by.

Fruit Tramps

I: Tell me about harvesting fruit in Cove.

RC: When I was a kid the fruit tramps (cherry pickers) camped where the Adventist church is now. There was a grove of locust trees and that was where the fruit

tramps would come in and camp. I really don't know who owned it. It was just there and they used that for a campground for a good many years. I remember going down to the packing shed and seeing these camps in there; they'd have their campfires where they would cook their food.

We also had a barn behind the house and would have two or three camps there as well s three or four camps up in the orchard. There were no trailer houses then. I remember when one of our fruit tramps came in and he had kind of a makeshift camp trailer.

During the summer, we hired pickers for the fruit crops. We always had pickers, fruit tramps. They were white and called themselves fruit tramps. They came every year. It isn't like nowadays when the Mexicans come in crews. These fruit tramps would come in ones and twos, sometimes maybe a whole carload.

I: When do you think the pickers changed from being white to being Mexican?

RC: Somewhere between 1975 to1982.

I: Were farmers skeptical of hiring the Mexicans?

RC: It wasn't so much the other farmers, but the white pickers didn't want the Mexicans; some of them wouldn't work with them. I had good pickers. Everybody had good pickers and sometimes you had bad pickers. Some of them used to be our best friends and come back for years and years. In fact, their kids would come back and pick for us. We had two families like that.

I: But you decided to go ahead and hire some Mexican pickers?

RC: We didn't have enough pickers. It got so the white pickers were too few, too scarce. They were good, but there were not enough of them. Not that many were coming back to pick. I couldn't rely on them.

I: When did you start selling off the farm?

RC: I think in 1978. I had bought my brother's farm due to a family dispute. I was wanting to retire and this place here was more than I could work. At first we kept about forty acres and now we're down to sixteen.

I: How many acres did you originally have?

RC: This place was originally eighty-five; I bought an additional ten acres and then the other place I bought was two hundred and forty acres.

At one time I had about fifty acres of cherries and it took about fifty pickers to pick them. That was probably the biggest crew I had on the two places. You can imagine how many camps there would be with that many pickers; some families consisted of maybe a man, wife and four or five kids. You always wanted a big family because they'd pick more. The only bad part about that was if they quit, you lost a lot of your crew, but if they didn't quit, they got a lot of cherries.

I: Why would they quit?

RC: Sometimes the grass is greener on the other side of the fence. Somebody was getting a little more money, or a better tree or better cherries. Some years you wouldn't have any problems and then the next year you'd have all kinds of problems depending on the crop, and the weather of course. If you have a good crop you always have an easier time, a bad crop you have trouble because they had to make a wage, too. After we got the crews of Mexicans in, it's easier to pick cherries than it used to be. It just is easier on the growers.

I: Was it easier to pick cherries because of tools or people?

RC: Easier because of the Mexican labor. They want the job and they want to work. If you depended right now on white people or fruit tramps coming in, you wouldn't get any of the cherries picked. It's that simple.

I: Did they just demand higher pay?

RC: Higher pay and people just don't want to work very hard; it's difficult just getting local kids to work on a farm.

I: When did these changes come about?

RC: Probably within the last twenty years it's changed some. Our kids grew up in the '50s and '60s and they worked on the farm. I'd say after the Vietnam War maybe things began to change. Don't get me wrong, there are some of the kids around here and from La Grande who will come and work for different farmers. But by and large, most kids don't work at farming anymore.

For example, I need a fence fixed, and maybe some kids would be willing to work on a fence, but they need supervision, they never grew up with those kinds of chores so they don't know how to do a lot of stuff.

I: Why do you think it changed after the Vietnam War? Was it that people farmed less?

RC: No, they didn't farm less, but I think that money was easier to make in better times. When the particle board plant opened in '66, for a good many years over there anyone who walked in there could get a job at Boise Cascade. They came in

from different places to get jobs. Probably they're going out of this valley to get jobs because there just aren't any jobs here.

The Packing Houses

I: What do you remember about the packinghouses?

RC: It was a fun time for me to work. I mean it was a good job for a kid. I got on because my dad was a cherry grower. There were only three or four boys who got jobs. I think that I got around twenty-five to twenty-seven cents an hour when I started in.

There were two belts that they dumped cherries on. There were six to eight women sorters, and they'd have probably at least ten packers on each line maybe more, who actually packed the cherries. They'd make two rows of what they called packed fruit. We'd pick up those packed boxes and take them down to the end of the line where they would be filled with loose cherries. There were two rows of packed cherries; all you could see would be just faces of cherries, no stems. The stems were on but they faced the opposite direction. (They have pictures of this at the Cherry Festival.) The women who packed the cherries got so much a box for packing those cherries. They were fast at packing a hundred or a hundred and twenty boxes a day and made maybe six or seven dollars a day.

I: How old were you when you got hired on?

RC: Probably fourteen.

I: Were the other boys who worked with you hauling boxes about the same age?

RC: Yes. They also had four or five older men running the wheel carts and bringing the cherries and dumping them on the belts. There were also two or three box makers. Frank Music and his wife, both of them made boxes. Tom Harris made boxes, too.

I: So the packinghouses did everything from making boxes to shipping the cherries out.

RC: They got a ship in – they called it box ship – and they would line them with paper. One of the girls would paste paper inside to make them fancy. They put a label on the ends of boxes. I have several labels here.

I worked in the packinghouse until it shut down. The Conley brothers hauled the fruit with their trucks and Herman Heyford iced the cars with ice that he'd put up in his icehouses. He had ice ponds up there. There were two packinghouses in Cove. There was Stacklin's who owned this farm – in fact we bought the farm

from Carl Stacklin, Jr. They had a packinghouse downtown right about where the drive-in is now. The other packinghouse and receiving shed are still standing.

At present they use it to receive and ship cherries out. Miller has his own receiving and shipping place here in Cove on his own ranch. When we bought this place there was probably well over a hundred growers. I think a hundred-and-thirty I counted once. Now they're down to about six or eight that are in the association.

I: Why is that?

RC: Competition and small growers can't afford the costs to spray and take care of one or two, three trees like they used to have. Anybody that had a tree and had extra fruit, they could bring the fruit down; we would take it. Now it's not economically feasible to do that. Spray is one thing that they have to concentrate on. Of course we had spray then, too, but not as much as now.

I: Has spraying has increased?

RC: The bugs have gotten worse, I think. They're hard to control.

They had two prune dryers here, John Dean and Tom Conklin owned them. They bought prunes, dried them and would ship them out of the county. Those dryers had a furnace.

The last year we shipped cherries – I remember this well – it was hard times and so cherries didn't sell very well. The last year we shipped, the cannery came in and bought the cherries. Some of the cherries that we shipped we lost money on but the prunes paid the freight on the cherries. When I was still in high school the Paulius brothers took over. When we bought this place Paulius brothers were still buying cherries and we sold cherries to them for a good many years.

I: Who were the Paulius brothers?

RC: The Paulius company is in Salem, Oregon. They sold out to the Dole pineapple company. In fact, almost up to about 1977 we were still selling to Dole.

Dole bought that cannery and they ran the fruit operation but it closed down due to the fact that canned cherries are something people buy in the stores anymore. There's only one cannery that cans cherries we know of in the Northwest now, and that's in Vancouver.

Rundle's packed both pears and apples here, but the Cherry Growers Co-op took care of the cherries. There were other private packinghouses like Stacklin's that packed apples and pears. They had a lot of acres of apples and prunes, more so than they did cherries in the early days. There were lots of prune makers, but

those crops didn't pay as well the apples and pears; the only crop that has survived is the cherries.

I: Did the different packinghouses here in Cove all do the same thing?

RC: They all did the same thing. Stacklin's packed cherries, apples and pears. In fact, Stacklin had quite an acreage of cherries and then he'd buy cherries from different growers and ship them out. Stacklin went out of business before the other ones. During the summer, there would be two crews working two different packinghouses, the women had about a month of work.

I: So the packinghouses provided about a month of work?

RC: About a month, three weeks maybe. High school girls and older women counted on those jobs in the summer.

I: Why did Stacklin's packinghouse go out of business first?

RC: I think economics, hard times and it was during the Depression. The Association quit shipping cherries because it wasn't a paying proposition.

I: How long after Stacklin quit did the co-op packinghouse quit?

RC: I don't know exactly when Stacklin quit, but the co-op quit packing cherries in about 1936 or '7. I graduated in '41 and we had been selling to the cannery before that. I'm just guessing it was 1936 or 1937 when Paulius Brothers came in and started buying the cherries.

When they came in and it was altogether different. Before, everybody had to have their own boxes to pick their fruit and when Paulius came in, they brought their own boxes in with trucks and took them out with trucks.

Festivals in Cove

I: What do you know about the Cherry Festival?

RC: The Cherry Festival in the early days – and I don't know what year it started – was quite a celebration. They had a Queen Anne and a King Bing. It ended somewhere around 1918 or 1919. I don't know why it stopped, maybe just lack of interest. It was revived again three years ago, I believe.

I: 2000, 2001?

RC: Yes, whatever date is on that picture. That was the first one and they asked me to be the grand marshal.

I: What do you know about the May Day Festival?

RC: May Day festivals when I was a kid were more like a great community affair along with the grade and high schools. The high school had a May Queen and the grade schools put on a program in the morning; the program was held either in the schoolhouse or outside. The high school girls and boys were divided with the freshman and seniors one side and the juniors and sophomores on the other side, competing in athletics, track and field and swimming. In the late afternoon there was a baseball game.

I: Would everybody participate?

RC: Everybody participated; it was lots of fun and a big interest with the community. The grade school put up a lot of decorations and wound the May Pole. It was quite a celebration.

I: What sort of festivities did the grade school put on?

RC: Just pageants, little skits and that kind of thing. The girls all had their little dresses and the boys had white shirts or their best clothes on. Generally one of the classes in high school would – and I'm not sure which one it was – sell hamburgers, hot dogs and ice cream at the Home Ec room. Maybe there was lemonade as well. To finish the day, there was a swim meet up at the Cove swimming pool. The winning grade would get a party – and I don't even remember what kind of a party – but it was always quite a competition to see who would come in first on the meet.

I: How were the local town folk involved?

RC: We had a lot of support from the townspeople, especially with baseball, basketball and football, just like now. On May Day there was always a lot of townspeople involved; it was a community day. It was like the Cherry Festival, really. The program and athletic contests were well attended. They had some old-timers like Judge Grover Duffy who used to judge the athletic contests.

I: What other memories can you share with us?

Flourmill antics

RC: When we were in fifth or sixth grade, the school was in the bank building because they were building a new schoolhouse. Mill Hill was kind of our kids' playground since we didn't have a formal playground. There were four or five of us boys who went up there at noon hour, and the old pipe that the water came down in was still intact. I don't know whose idea it was, but there was four or five of us in on it. We found a round rock that would fit inside that pipe. The pipe

had been disconnected; the mill had been converted to electricity, but the pipe and the wheel were still intact. We got that rock, sent it down that pipe. You could hear that noise all over Cove when it hit the water-wheel, the dust just flew out the top of that mill. The wheel was just roaring with the dust flying out of the top. We boys ran up towards the swimming pool, clear up there and we didn't get back to school for about an hour.

I: What made you come back?

RC: We had to come back to school. Ben Duffy came running out of the mill; he was hunting for those kids who'd done it. He knew who had done it but he couldn't find us. We had snuck back into school about an hour later. Nothing ever came of it. I'll always remember that dust flying out of the top of that mill.

I: You said everybody could hear the noise of the road, did you hear comments from anybody wondering who did it?

RC: Oh, it was pretty well known. I mean the kids at school all knew who done it and of course it was the talk of the town. It really didn't hurt anything, but it made a roar and a commotion and dust around there for a little bit.

Indians

RC: The other thing that I might share with you is – and I don't know when this stopped – but every fall the Indians would come over from Pendleton, Chief Minthorn, and go into the Minam to get deer and white fish. They'd have their horses and the bucks would be riding. The chief and others would have their travois, dragging behind going up Mill Creek Road here, and the squaws would be walking along. They'd come in from Pendleton and go up into the Minam, to the Salmon Hole.

The squaws would pick huckleberries, and help smoke the fish. They dug camas out here on what I call the Roy Baker place. It's right past the grange hall. That used to be where they dug camas roots and made flour.

I: Do you know what camas root is like?

RC: I know it has a blue flower and a large root, but I've never dug any up. We have a few camas here. The Indians dug the roots up and then they powdered it and made flour out of it.

I: Do you remember when they stopped coming to do that?

RC: I don't remember exactly when they stopped, but I would say sometime in the '30s. When I was a small, I remember them as I was going down to the packinghouse or about the time that school started. We would meet them and I asked Dad about it. "Well, they're going into the Minam."

I: Do you know why they stopped?

RC: No, I don't. Maybe by then, they had their transportation, going in by car.

I: Is there anything else you can think of that you'd like to share?

Volunteering

RC: [Pointing to a photograph] I'm one of the original trustees on the __ Tony Kankridge Educational Foundation that gives scholarships for students in Union and Wallowa Counties in Northeastern Oregon. We've been doing it since 1978 and this year it's up to about $900,000 that we've given away. We don't dip into the original money; this is all just from accumulated interest.

I: How was the Foundation started?

RC: These two ranchers over by Union didn't have any heirs; they were always supportive of the local youth and they set this foundation up -- money from the sale of their ranch and timber holdings. We do have money to loan, but because the interest rate is so low we haven't been making any loans. The money is mainly for scholarships.

RC: They're nice scholarships, too, about $5,000.

RC: I'm a past master of the Mt. Fanny Grange and past president of the Cove Sportsman Club. I'm also a life member of the VFW in La Grande, 2990, and a life member of the Elks Club.

I: So you're pretty active still.

RC: I try to be. I don't do much with the Sportsman Club and I don't get to VFW meetings too much because it's a little hard for me to go up the stairs. But this last year we presented a flag down here to the school. Burt Hill is another life member and last winter he asked me to help him. We're still active in the Sportsman Club. Earlier in Cove, I was an officer of the Cove Cherry Association for a good many years, secretary and the director.