

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History # 462

Interviewee: Helen Felt

Interviewer: Matt Simek

Date: June 29, 2008

Place: Felt Recording Room, Harney County Library, Burns, Oregon

Subject: Helen (Smith) Felt

MATT SIMEK: This is June 28<sup>th</sup>, Saturday morning, 2008. And we are interviewing Helen Smith Felt in the Helen Smith and Chester Felt Oral History Room, at the Harney County Library. The interviewer is Matt Simek of Newberg. And we are going to pick up where we left off in your interview ten years ago with Dorothea Purdy, and that was June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1997. And I read this, very interesting stuff, and I looked over your book, and it was all fascinating. But you know one thing really struck me about all of this is that the basics were covered. Your children, your times, the marriages and so on and so on. And so I thought that we would just skip that since it is already in the record, and let's get on to some really interesting stuff. And ---

HELEN FELT: You lead the way.

MATT: --- find out who Helen Smith Felt is. I'd like to start off with those early years of ranch life. To me that's very fascinating. And you had a lot of feelings about that, and

I'd like to do a lot of compare and contrast. So you had your feelings, your life as a young girl on a ranch. And you were born in Trout Creek?

HELEN: Denio.

MATT: Oh, you were born in Denio, okay.

HELEN: In Denio.

MATT: You lived on a ranch at Trout Creek.

HELEN: After that, when I was four years old.

MATT: Okay. And because of all of that you said your childhood was very happy.

HELEN: It was.

MATT: Now today's children wouldn't necessarily think so because you spent most of your day working.

HELEN: That's right.

MATT: And so tell me about that. How did you see your childhood on the ranch?

HELEN: Well my mother had one doctrine, we were a large family, she was stretched to the limit. And my father was away most of the time contracting, to be able to make a living. And mother did everything. And so all of us children did everything as well. But we never regarded it as an obligation, it was part of life. You got up in the morning and you did your chores, and you achieved happiness through what you did. And I think that's something missing in today's society, because I see my great-grandchildren have to be entertained. And they'll say Mother I'm bored. Well with my mother, if we had conflicts, her solution was to get busy. And so you preferred not to have a conflict because you had another chore to do, and you best do it right. So, that leads to happiness.

I was also tremendously blessed because I had an older sister who had a very positive attitude of life, and everything was a game. We would hitch up the dogs to have them --- little wagon, haul the wood. And she would make things interesting. And she was always in my corner.

I was never well as a small child, I had trouble with my back. And so some times I would be totally disabled. My mother would hear me groaning and come in and run her hands under my back to turn me over in bed, because I couldn't make it over, to turn over in bed. But my Sis would always be there to pick up the extra heavy loads, or to do those things that I was grumbling about, or would have liked to have grumbled about. And so life was always fun. And I was fortunate that she would include me. She was two years older and I could have been shoved in the background, but I never was. She always was there for me through my entire life.

MATT: How many of you were in the family at that early age?

HELEN: At that early age there was my older sister Barbara. And then the next sister is four years younger than I, and we rarely, rarely enjoyed each other. She was --- I didn't do for her what Barbara did for me. And there was a, born at Trout Creek was also my brother Vern and my sister Ervene. So there were all those little kids.

MATT: And how did you relate to them?

HELEN: Oh I was the baby sitter. Because I had a bad back I could not help with the heavy chores. I couldn't pitch hay, I couldn't chop wood and do those things. But I could always tend the baby and keep him out of the creek, or her out of the creek. Because we lived on Trout Creek and it run, in those days --- well it still does probably run high in the spring, and was always a danger of drowning one of the babies, so you never let them out

of your site. And that was my specific obligation, not to ever lose track of the baby. And there was always the baby. Every two years mother had another child, until she had the last. Well let's see, just would be my brother Earl and my brother Milo who were born after we left Trout Creek.

MATT: So your back was a congenital deformity of one of the vertebrae?

HELEN: Actually that, it was. There is one flange off of that lower fifth lumbar I believe it is, that was not there. But it would slip by, and if I did something I shouldn't, or got bucked off of a horse or something of this sort happened, then I'd be laid up.

MATT: And what would happen when you got bucked off of a horse?

HELEN: Oh, oh, I learned the very best lesson that has sustained me throughout my entire life. Life is going to buck you off sister, quote my father. And when it does you better learn to get back on and ride. And that is what we did. And he would say, "Well what kind of a mistake did you make that time?" So you just learn by your mistakes. Also, which is a valuable lesson that children are not permitted to do now. They are over-protected, over --- you can't say they are over mothers, because their mothers are away from home so much. But children are not raised the same today as we were raised.

MATT: Now I've heard that spoken many times by many different people. And can you thumb-nail, go into that a little bit more about children not raised today the way you were raised. Good and bad, I would imagine there are some things that are better today than back then.

HELEN: You know I find it very difficult to observe with my great-grandchildren, because so many of my children's generation --- well I think it is true of every generation, the new generation does not make the mistakes that the previous generation

made. So the mothering, the parenting skills are probably grounded in, not doing what my mother did to me that I didn't like, so I'm not going to ever do it any more. And the fact that the mores have changed so desperately that the parameters that parents have to be guided by, are so elusive, they change before they get to the first base with their children. And I have now six great-grandchildren, and the parenting skills of those youngsters, or young people, young parent, they are sort of interesting. I have a granddaughter who patterns her guidance, I would say may be, to what I would do. What would Gram do, rather than what would here mother do, which just totally fascinates me. And then I have one granddaughter who was raised by a mother who had no parameters whatsoever, and her children flounder. They are having a hard time adjusting to life. Because those early patterns and mores and rules and regulations by which one can guard their lives, are not transmitted. And if they aren't, that person who grows and develops is going to have a harder time, just a very harder time.

MATT: In ways I suppose it was easier on the farm because, or on the ranch, because there weren't distractions like there are today. Is that part of the problem?

HELEN: Well society has moved --- okay my lifetime has spanned through these two revolutions, the industrial and this --- what do you call the new generation? That word has escaped me this minute. It's not a cultural revolution, it's a technological revolution. And the technology has come upon these people, the, all of us so rapidly we haven't a chance to adjust. And I think that is why the young people find it very difficult to set parameters of behavior, because the parameters don't work today that worked yesterday. And they are totally having to adjust all of the time. Where in my generation we didn't

have to adjust much, and certainly not on a farm. Because the animals were just there, and that's what you did.

MATT: You had a very close relationship with each other, in so far as you were a family all living together. Even though you maybe didn't relate as well to your younger siblings as you did to your older sister.

HELEN: Well just one sister, the one just under me, that was the hard one.

MATT: Oh. The rest of them were ---

HELEN: The rest of them were my babies actually. You wouldn't believe that one time they tell me I did this, and I know I did it, I can remember doing it. They wouldn't sleep, the baby wouldn't go to sleep so I could go outside. So I held their eyes shut with my fingers. (Laughter)

MATT: Did it work?

HELEN: No! Just made them stronger to defy me.

MATT: Babies are very defiant. (Laughter) I'm curious about that. Because you talk about the technological revolution, and there is some people who say that with e-mail and the internet, and all of these other, and cell phones, communications tools, it's driven, it's drawn people closer together. But I sort of contend that it has driven people farther apart.

HELEN: I believe you're right.

MATT: They seem to have their own television in their own rooms, they eat alone, they don't eat as a family together, they don't work together as a family. Those are bad moves.

HELEN: Now I have one grandchild who is absolutely adamant that all meals are together, so they have learned one thing about that. And I think all of that particular

generation of my family have listened when I have said, “If you don’t eat together, pray together, or live together, you will never be together.” And so you had better guard those things while these children are babies, and make them important in your life.

MATT: Your family is important.

HELEN: That’s right.

MATT: Now there are some people who today say that family used to be important from the cave days on, when life was harder. But now life is so easy, that a life of independence is something that is very positive. And you yourself have thought that being independent at times is a very reasonable lifestyle, as opposed to being dependent on others. So how do you resolve these two points of view?

HELEN: Well I would consider that the point of view that you maintain your independence within a family or a parameter of support. And, balance is the key word. That if you are over either way, if you got too much independence then you’re not a good corporate person, and you don’t do the things that you need for benefit of the whole. But if you are a person who can retain your privacy within the parameters of what’s best for the group.

I had a hard time with teaching with that, because I taught in a self-contained classroom where every child’s needs are different. And yet the needs of the whole have to be considered. And the child who can accept themselves within the body of politics per se, and still be a person, then they are the best people, they are the best balanced persons in our society.

MATT: How did that stack up? You saw this as a teacher in Burns and Hines. How did those kinds of values stack up with the young people that you saw coming through these schools, versus people who you saw coming through say more urban schools?

HELEN: It's interesting. The children in the rural setting of Crane School for example, are total individual people. And yet they adapt very readily to a communal living within the parameters of the dormitory. And because they are --- if that child has learned, as is part of self acceptance --- my sister was saying to me just yesterday that she has a daughter-in-law who so consumed her children with criticism, that they don't know who they are. And that robs the individual of knowing what you are going to best be able to do in life.

MATT: They grow up with a fear that they won't be able to do anything.

HELEN: Yes, and they do nothing. And in this particular instance they are finding it very difficult to make any decision, and life decisions that are constructive for themselves.

MATT: It's tempting to dive into the psychological analysis of what makes a person want to do that to her children. But that's not what we are here for, so ---

HELEN: Well I think its basis is, they don't know how to be parents.

MATT: There are people who suggest it should be a licensing opportunity, that people should not be allowed to be parents until they go through classes, and learn parenting and get a license. So ---

HELEN: There are no training schools for parenting I guess.

MATT: No, there certainly aren't.

HELEN: It's an individual art.



MATT: Speaking of training schools, let's go back just a moment and tell us a little bit about Crane School, because there may be some of us who are not familiar with what a unique place that is.

HELEN: Oh, I never attended Crane School. I moved on in to Burns. But all of my siblings went to school in Crane, and they had a good experience. They had --- there again it is dependent upon the personnel that run the school. Just as your success in the classroom depends on the skills of the teacher.

MATT: Now Crane School is a residential school.

HELEN: Right.

MATT: And is it true that it is the last residential school in the country?

HELEN: I understand there is supposed to be one some other place, but they are very rare.

MATT: And as you have pointed out, Crane has had its ups and downs too, when it was more of a disciplinary school, it was different than it is today. Which is more of an innovative forward thinking kind of school.

HELEN: I have had no experience with the recent years in Crane, because I have been away from Harney County now for almost 40 years. So, I don't know what has been happening down in Crane, but it has survived. And my relatives who go there think it's the best school in the world. And they have a good record, they have a good record of everything --- academically as well as with sports of course. Sports is very important to Harney County.

MATT: How did you feel when you left 40 years ago? Were you glad to go, or were you eager, or ---

HELEN: No, I was not glad to go. But I knew that I had to go, because I had no children left here, or immediate family left here in Burns. And my husband and I had always planned to leave the, leave Harney County because of the severity of the climate. We were going to go --- he had been raised at the coast, and he wanted to go back to the coast. So, though he had passed away, that was paramount in my mind that we had intended to move. And I decided that I would move nearer to where my children were. And I was able to buy a property just across the street where Charlene was raising three children, as a ---

MATT: Single mother.

HELEN: --- single mother. And I knew she needed my strong ... of support. And the property across the road became available so I bought it and left.

MATT: So you have been living in Salem now for ---

HELEN: Just one year.

MATT: And before that you lived where?

HELEN: In The Dalles, in The Dalles, Oregon.

MATT: So The Dalles is still sort of rural.

HELEN: But it was as equally as difficult to transition. Because the people in The Dalles are like they are in any other locality, they are all comfortable, they have their circles, they have their friends, they have their support systems, and you have to make your own. And that's not easy.

MATT: How long did you live there?

HELEN: Twenty-five years. And when I was writing my book, and I said, "Well Harney County is my roots." And I had lived a major part of my life in Harney County.

Well I didn't realize that I've already spent a fourth of my life in The Dalles. So The Dalles became really home too. That was a hard transition, very difficult. Harder really than it was to leave Harney County.

MATT: But you did achieve it. You've made that transition.

HELEN: Well, I like to think I have. (Laughter) I'm still working at it. Because I went into a retirement center. And then you've lost your independence. What in --- but you also become an artist at being independent. You have to. (Laughter)

MATT: Explain a little more about that.

HELEN: Well you have to get some reason to get up in the morning and put your clothes on, and face the day. And you have, it's like when you are a little child, you have to, you choose to either be happy or sad, or satisfied, or mad about something. And I had to, it took me several months --- I don't think, it wouldn't have been so hard if I haven't had been in pain. But I had fallen and broken my shoulder and my arm in two places, between the shoulder and elbow. So I was, and I'm very right handed, and I had to be left handed. Everything was in transition. Everything, you know, now even eating was in transition.

So I didn't make a very good adjustment for awhile, which was totally disturbing to my daughter, because she had insisted it was time for me to move. So every word that came out of my mouth that wasn't positive, was negative. And that was hard for her.

MATT: Now you broke your arm in the past year?

HELEN: No, it's now about a year and a half ago.

MATT: Okay. And you had already moved to Salem?

HELEN: I moved --- no I broke my arm while I was still at The Dalles. And that was the last straw. You cannot live alone any longer, Mother. And I would have lived alone a lot longer had I not broken my arm.

MATT: Tell me about your relationship with your children.

HELEN: I have a good one. I think probably average competition now, that your children begin to be, feel responsible for you. And you don't want them to be. I saw a little bit of that in my sister though, yesterday, she seemed to want her daughter to be responsible for everything, you know. It's your worry what we eat, where we go, what we do, and I don't have that to fight at all. And my son --- I'll have to tell a funny story here on record. I fell down a stairs when in my home in Hawaii, and my son was, came and carried me back upstairs. The next morning he went to work and forgot I had fallen, didn't even check on me to see if I was alive. And he was so anxious I, that I move over there with him. And I said, "Honey, you just forget I was here." (Laughter) And he is pretty much like that, he treats me, well what are you going to do about it? And doesn't even hardly help make a decision. Charlene would probably be more prone to say, we ought to do this. And then I don't agree with her, sometimes we have some butting of heads, but not much.

MATT: The viewer won't be able to see this, but I'm smiling, and it is only because I'm 64, and my father is 93, and my mother is 87. And they still live in the home that they built in 1946, and they are very independent. And they don't want their children looking after them either. Although they do appreciate when my sister, who lives 15 miles from them, comes and visits on a regular basis. But they like her to come and visit, but they

don't want people taking care of them. They are perfectly capable of taking care of themselves.

HELEN: I thought so too, until I broke my arm.

MATT: Yeah, we all need help from time to time.

HELEN: Yes.

MATT: You've had such a fascinating life, and one of the things that I notice is how much traveling that you and your husband did. You traveled the world.

HELEN: Oh, yes.

MATT: And I'm curious about how your views were shaped as you explored your horizons from country to country. And what you saw in different countries that made you think differently.

HELEN: Well actually I had such a good foundation in education, that I had visited all of these countries in a book. And I had visited all these countries to learn about their people. And my approach to teaching social studies was what happens in this country that is due to their physical environment, together with their mores or their rules of living. And so my point, more than my husband's I think, was how does this attitude add up in actually what happens in these countries. And it was interesting when we were in Germany for example. I had taught American pronunciations of the German cities, and mountains, and terrain, and that's not what the Germans called it at all. (Laughter) And it was an appreciation, I think I came away with all of my travels with the true knowledge that people are the same everywhere you go. They truly are just human beings trying to do whatever they can do in the environment in which they live, and with the set of laws and regulations by which they are bound, and go from there. And I, we chose in every

country, to stay at Bed and Breakfasts, and experience the people rather than be a tourist. And that's a whole different ballgame as well.

MATT: It certainly is. I did that very same thing, and whether you are in Scotland, or New Zealand, or China, it really makes such a difference to see it from the people's perspective.

HELEN: That's right. Otherwise you shouldn't be there.

MATT: Did you see a difference in say the European urbans versus say the Chinese rural in the way that they approached living?

HELEN: Oh, there was a very grave contrast at that time. Because China was communist, and those people were lock-stepped, really lock-stepped at the time I was in China. And they are not as much so now, because I have been back. But I wasn't in the Chinese interior more recently. But I can see on television that they are not as lock-step as they were at that time. And the European people were interesting. The French still didn't like us. They would not speak English, and they could speak English if they wanted to. And the Germans were still a little bit lock-stepped. You didn't step off of the curb there, or you didn't --- If you were standing in a queue, you didn't move your shoulders out of line one way or the other, or somebody would tap you and tell you this is where you belong, still, when we were there. But they're more independent now too.

MATT: It's very interesting to me how at times I think that, well as the recently past, George Carlin said we're not, we're still in the jungle. And my comparable phrase to that was we're not very far out of the cave, and sometimes celebration is a very thin veneer over the basic human animals that we still are to a great extent.

HELEN: Yes, and it manifests itself in these wars that we get into. And with the total lack of leadership sometimes that are thrust upon us, but I guess we choose somehow. Maybe the Supreme Court chose it. But we have been in a real difficulty lately.

MATT: Expand on it.

HELEN: Pardon?

MATT: Expand on that a little bit.

HELEN: Oh, I think the decisions that Bush has made has greatly damaged America's image in the world. And has led us down a path we didn't need to go. I think there is a better way. And I think the way that he has manipulated the news, the media, the courts, the whole of our system has been a travesty. I really believe that. It's a good thing my sister isn't here, because she says he hasn't done anything wrong.

MATT: Along this same line of going back to the cave, it seems to me that there are different ways of expressing these kinds of fundamental human feelings, and they come out in little different ways from place to place, but they are all basically the same. And when you talk about the Bush administration, manipulating the system and so forth, to achieve their ends, and then we look what's happening in Africa where they use physical force to achieve their ends, ... the same ends.

HELEN: Yes, indeed they are, they really are.

MATT: We just choose different ways to pursue them. But it seems like there is always those who want to dominate the others, and there are always those who want to be dominated. And it seems to me that, and this is coming back to life on the farm by the way, but it seems to me that for those are intent on being dominated, it is because they

never learned their own independence, and they really just want to be taken care of. Now is that something that farm life might fix?

HELEN: It does, yeah. The terrible ... is true. It is pretty well true.

MATT: It takes a long time doesn't it for self-esteem to evolve.

HELEN: Right, right it does.

MATT: And if you are used to being subjugated it's easier to be that way than it is to take responsibility for your own life.

HELEN: I had a battle, a personal battle in developing that very facet of my being, in so far as my mother was partial to her children. There were those who could do no wrong, and there were those who could do no right, in a big family. For many years I judged my mother for that, and came to realize that with all the burden she had to raise seven children there was no other way to do it. If you were a difficult kid, you caused her more trouble, you got in to more trouble. And if you didn't do your chore properly and you had to be chastised, whose fault is that. And for --- it took me many years to accept the responsibility that I had. Because she was --- never as supportive of me, my psyche say, as she was of some of the other children.

MATT: So you considered yourself one of the more troublesome children?

HELEN: I probably was. I didn't think so. (Laughter) But I probably was. Because I remember one time one of my most severe chastisements was for being sassy. Well, what is sassy? Sassy is, you're trying to put your point of view out there and have it considered. And I would get it --- and I know --- I remember with mother's discipline. She would just --- whamming the daylights out of one of the little kids and I got --- Mom, don't hit him again, don't hit him again. And she said, you stay out of this or you're



going to get some. And she turned around and whipped me a couple. So, how else do you survive, you know. And maybe that is the way the Hitler's of the world develop, is because they can whack harder.

MATT: Certainly that was true, Hitler and Stalin and all the --- using the term euphemistic, great dictators.

HELEN: Right.

MATT: They had --- were cruel.

HELEN: They had the biggest stick. And maybe that is part of human nature that has to be kept under control somehow. But I don't know that wars and killing off people is the way to do it.

MATT: Obviously your mother was a great influence in your life. Who were some of the other ---

HELEN: The greatest influence in my life was my dad. When life was not bearable to me, and I'd had a whacking that I didn't think I deserved, my dad was there for me. Never in an interference roll, but in the roll that, what are you going to do about it. It's your responsibility. And that's helpful.

MATT: Now he was gone a good part of the time though, wasn't he?

HELEN: He was gone, but his influence was right there. You would know within five minutes of a glance from my dad, what you had done wrong.

MATT: Now this, and I should say he was gone because he was ---

HELEN: He was away from home.

MATT: He was a sales person.

HELEN: Well he was a hay contractor.

MATT: Oh, okay.

HELEN: And harvest. There was a time in my early childhood when my father had over a hundred head of horses under harness. And did the hay contracting as far north as, oh I can't say where it is --- oh I can't say where it is. Oh, Frenchglen, Frenchglen. And as far south as Winnemucca and Battle Mountain. And he had his equipment there, and it was all horse-drawn. In my early laboring days were driving a team to rake hay, or pull-back hay and harvest.

MATT: So even though you had a back problem you were still out there being very physical.

HELEN: Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes. I've ridden to school five and a half miles when I couldn't get off of the horse, the teacher would help me down. Let me lay on a bench on my back and hold my book over my face because my back hurt too badly. But, by night I'd have to ride home another five and a half miles.

MATT: Who was that teacher?

HELEN: Oh, she was wonderful. She was the second influence in my, greatest influence in my life. Her name was Huffman, Mary Huffman, and she was the dearest person in the world, and a wonderful teacher.

MATT: She taught you from what year?

HELEN: First grade through --- probably eighth.

MATT: How many kids in the school.

HELEN: In Trout Creek School, well that's in the Trout Creek School History, let me see. I think the max was about twelve, and at least maybe six.

MATT: She was the only teacher?

HELEN: Oh yes, yeah.

MATT: How did she influence you?

HELEN: Oh, in every way. And somehow she was responsible in my development to expand my mind. I edited a newspaper under her guidance. I think that part of that newspaper is in my book. And she was such a wonderful example of a human being, just a wonderful lady. And her daughter and I remain friends throughout our lives. And her granddaughter is still one of my best friends, and lives in New York. And we are in contact --- we're like family.

MATT: How wonderful.

HELEN: To this day.

MATT: Did she influence you toward your career in English?

HELEN: Oh yes, I intended to be a teacher. I'm going to be another Mrs. Huffman. And many of the things I did in the class were like that. I didn't do one thing that Mrs. Huffman did to me. I didn't know the parameters of behavior as well as I might have. Acceptable behaviors, and I swore and her son was an eighth grader, and he put my --- my mother would put my hair in curls. And he pulled one of my curls down and put it in the ink well. And I turned around in the seat and slapped him. And I said you stop that, damn you. And she said you don't talk like that. And she --- I don't remember what her punishment was to Joseph, but my punishment was she hung me up in a sack. She put me in ---

MATT: She what?

HELEN: She hung me up in a sack. She put me in a, probably a gunny sack, and just hung the gunny sack on the wall. My feet touched the ground, and I had to stand there in

the gunny sack. I never swore anywhere in public again in my life. That was a good discipline.

MATT: I never heard of that one.

HELEN: I never heard of it either, and I never practiced it when I got to teaching. But that's what happened to me. She hung me up in a sack. (Laughter) She just put that sack down there and I stepped in it, and she hung it up. See I can't get this arm up very far. And hung it up on a nail. And there I stayed until she let me down.

MATT: Effective.

HELEN: Yes, it was effective. But she also handed me a book to read while I was there.

MATT: Oh, so your head wasn't covered.

HELEN: Oh no.

MATT: Oh just ---

HELEN: No, just hanging in it --- was just immobilized in a sack. (Laughter) Oh, she was wonderful.

MATT: What took you toward English, what was your fascination?

HELEN: Well my father was a self-educated person. His father was a college professor in Southern California before his death. And Dad could quote "Thanatopsis" and had many --- and he encouraged us. And I was more amenable to that encouragement than some of the other --- My older sister wouldn't do it, she wasn't interested, and she did never learn a poem. But oh, I would learn reams of poetry, and my dad would encourage me to say them. And then he'd, and he'd say them with me, and we'd have just wonderful fun times with the early literatures, as well as the poetry. And he would show

me, and Mrs. Huffman would encourage that. He would show me why these writings had survived. And it's probably my motivation to be interested in the English language.

MATT: It is curious to me these days how people don't even apologize for a lack of knowledge of English. And yet, there is a huge movement, even in my neighborhood against, I mean they just rail against the idea of people speaking Spanish in America. Oh no, we have to have English as the national language. But they don't even know English. I mean they are very poor with the use of this language.

HELEN: That's right.

MATT: So I am curious as to how you accept people's inability today to use the language.

HELEN: I don't. I think it is inexcusable. When I listen to the television and I hear people use bad grammar, and bad construction in their presentation. It is getting better. It really is getting better I think, than it was for awhile. I think we are probably going through a cycle when English is important because of the business of the, probably of the Spanish infusion into our society. But I tutored Mexicans after I moved to The Dalles. I lived in a neighborhood, an orchard neighborhood where there were many, many Mexicans. And many Mexicans in The Dalles actually. We don't have that ethnic group in Harney County, so Harney County knows nothing except cowboys and Indians, really. (Laughter) And that's wonderful for them, and for everybody. But they don't, people I think here in Harney County don't appreciate the problems of ethnicity at all. I don't think they have any basis in which to make a decision. Whether the Mexican borders are, America's borders ought to be guarded, or whether they shouldn't. Because their lives are not touched by this Mexican population. Now in places like The Dalles they are big

numbers. And in Salem, and out in the valley they are in big numbers. I believe, with all my heart, that if you're going to be an American you should learn English. I believe also that as Americans we ought to respect and learn other people's languages. And know that they have reason to learn their language. Now my father-in-law was an immigrant from Sweden, and he would never speak Swede in their home. My father did not, or my husband did not learn the Swedish language, and I think that is sad. Because being multi-lingual is the best thing that could happen to you. Because then you can appreciate the other person. And so right, recently I've been trying since I went down there, I have to find a new way to live. When I moved to The Dalles I survived by enrolling in a class at the college every day of the week. I already had the credentials to have my PhD, but I didn't pursue that because it would have priced me out of a job. So I didn't need any credits, but I took classes, and my goal was to have one person, and hopefully two, in every class that would want to know me for me, and accept me into their society in The Dalles. And proved to be a good springboard.

MATT: A lot of people do it by going to bars. (Laughter)

HELEN: Well that I think would have introduced me to the wrong kind of society. But I met there a wonderful lady who drove a grain truck out in rural Wasco County. And we have remained friends and compatriots ever since. And it's like that. And one of the girls in my auto mechanics class for ladies, where I had to change a tire, and replace oil filters, and do everything else that a car of that magnitude, of that day --- and I have a friend from that class, that has remained a friend all these years. So you have to find some way to identify. What I had to do to survive moving into a --- I do not live in an assisted living facility, I live in a retirement center. And as I deteriorate I'll be able to

have more and more services without having to move. And that is a plus of course. Because I am not going to get younger and more able. But I took a notebook, I just started keeping a daily diary of something that happened that day for which I could be thankful. And it wasn't easy to find. And one day one of the residents got on the elevator and she, I live on the third floor, and she said, "Oh your hair is so beautiful." And I wrote it down in my book. Oh something good happened today I have beautiful hair. But you have to then reassess why you are living.

MATT: Share that a little more, I'd like to hear more about that.

HELEN: Well in reassessing why you are living, you have to have a goal, a reason to be doing something. And when you get in one of these facilities there really isn't any reason to do anything. They make your bed, they sweep your room, they cook your meals, they --- and what are you doing but getting up and getting your clothes on and going to the next meal. And I found that devastating, just totally devastating. So I volunteered to teach bridge. There are very few people there that have enough of their faculties left to learn bridge, or even to play it. Because, and I'm so fortunate because I have vision, I have hearing, I have my, brains work. And I have only met a half a dozen people since I've been there that have all of these working for them. So you have to then find in that other person, which I had to find when I taught children. I never taught a kid I didn't love, I never taught a kid that I couldn't find something to love, and I did never teach a child that didn't have something unique in their own person. And so that's what I'm doing now in this facility. I'm just finding people who have some of the attributes that I can identify with, and be helpful to, or aid and abet. And I do have a garden spot. And

when you have a plant you have to take care of it. And it is the only thing I have that I have to do. The only, very thing I have to do. And that's pretty tough.

MATT: I would think for me a parallel would be living for a year in a motel, I would find that very, very, very difficult.

HELEN: Yes, and this is even worse. Because you have all your things, but you don't do anything with them. And they have no reason to be there. I was so careful to what I moved, and now I look around me a year later and I wonder why I brought this here, it has no use to me. And it's hard to make that adjustment.

MATT: Do you have a lot of books?

HELEN: I've gone through this period, I have very little vision in this left eye, and that's why the threat of a cancer next to this eye is scary. But you don't dwell on that either. I could say every day, "Oh I'm going to die tomorrow because I'm going to go blind in my good eye." Well I'm not going to do that. If it happens, it happens. But I don't think it will. Something, I've been spared to do something, I don't know what it is.

MATT: Do you remember from your years as a teacher outstanding students?

HELEN: Oh yes, oh yes.

MATT: There are some that really come to mind?

HELEN: Yes.

MATT: Perhaps, without naming names, plus and minus.

HELEN: I've taught children, the hardest thing for me to accept in my teaching career is the fact that the gifted are not served. They are not served. And I had gifted children who would not pass their tests because they didn't want to stand out. They would not do it. And I now have followed the life of one boy who was a teacher's son, and she knew



his potential so she continued to support me on my demands on this boy. And I would demand of him, and I would hand him his test paper back and tell him to do it over, because he would deliberately mark it wrong so he wouldn't have a good score. And I had a little, oh I had many.

MATT: What happened to that one?

HELEN: Oh, he now is a professor in Florida. Had gone to, his mother saw to it that he went to the best schools. And he is a very successful man. I have often wanted to ask him if he remembers trying not to be smart. But they do that, they just have to do that to survive, because their classmates are cruel.

MATT: And that's how you become a Germany or a Zimbabwe or a ---

HELEN: That's true. And right now Harney County is doing just that. They have cut back on their gifted program. And it just grieves me so. And another thing that's happening here that just totally makes me, almost angry. Because I fought for probably twenty years or more to get a music program really established here. And I taught music supplemental to my demands in the classroom, and worked myself to death to be sure that the kids had a music background. And the musicians in the community supported that, and we had music in the schools. This year they cut the music out of the Burns Grade Schools.

MATT: Why?

HELEN: No money. And music prepares children to learn. It stimulates areas of the brain that they don't get any other place. And here they are letting that facet of education be neglected.

MATT: It seems that music and math go together very well.

HELEN: Oh, they just match, and science. Yep. It's not a good thing.

MATT: It seems that there is never enough money for schools, but always enough money for prisons. I wonder if there is a relationship there?

HELEN: Don't, let us not go there. I --- it would take the next hour of this interview to cover that one. But Oregon is so wrong, and America is so wrong with our penal system.

MATT: Twenty five thousand words or less?

HELEN: Why fill the prisons with people to support, when you could have avoided that for that very person by providing sustenance or just a place to be in life that they didn't have to turn to crime. And I think we are spending our money so badly in this country. We have more people incarcerated in the United States than any other civilized nation.

MATT: Per capita.

HELEN: Yes. And we are spending more on prisons than we do on education. Now that's, that is poor management of an intelligent society, in my book. That's twenty-five words or less.

MATT: I think it was Woody Allen who said that the best prison would be to lock the prisoner in a hotel room for two years with an insurance salesman. Definitely not want to do that.

HELEN: (Laughter) That's right.

MATT: But it has always been curious to me that whenever we catch somebody doing something wrong that obviously they did doing wrong, wrong because they got caught. So we send them to school to learn how to do it better so maybe they won't get caught next time they do it.

HELEN: That's true, that's what prisons are.

MATT: Biggest schools for ---

HELEN: My daughter has worked in the state department and had a wonderful program going for the prisoners in the way of education. That has been abandoned since she retired. And that again is wrong, wrong. But I guess it takes enough of us to become aroused about it before it will be better.

MATT: How have we gotten that way? What has been our failing as a society that took us down that road.

HELEN: You know I've never given that much thought. I don't know how we got there, but I surely don't like where we are. But I know that education would be the way to get out. And doing --- oh one of the things that has gotten us there more than anything else, probably is our treatment of the Negro. And possibly the Indians. Although in my experience we have tried really hard to do right by the Indians in the last century. And that hasn't proved to be profitable. I don't know, either in gains for the Indians, or for the money spent, or whatever it is. And maybe we haven't tried hard enough to leave their way of life alone. But you can't hardly do it in the complex society, because they don't want to embrace our society. Now the Negro wanted to embrace our society, but we kept him subjugated for free labor for two hundred years. It was a good way to have, get, then keep the industrial revolution operating because they couldn't get out of the trenches they were in. We saw to it they didn't.

I had an encounter with an American ... sort of individual sitting next to me at an educational conference in Georgia and he said, "Well you know the Negro is an inferior person." And my lord I just came out of my ... I said, I happen to know buster, I've been in education long enough to know there have been studies made that a Negro has as much

brain power, as much brain power as you do, but you never allowed him to use it. “Oh”, he said, “I beg your pardon mam.” We just didn’t have much more table conversation.

MATT: It is amazing how prevalent some of those attitudes still are.

HELEN: Yes, and it is prevalent even today. They made some gains, but they aren’t good enough. They really are not good enough. And maybe that is what is filling our prisons, disproportionately with young black men.

MATT: There was a man, his first name I don’t remember, his last name is Wells. And I may think of it before the end of this. He wrote a wonderful book and did incredible research in, called, “The Journey of Man”. And he used genetic markers to trace how the earth was populated. And he traced it backward, and developed paths of how we originated in Africa. And then went through various tracks to go about populating the world. And it is so fascinating that we started off as black people, and involved into white people when the black pigment was no longer necessary. And I’m delighted to point that out to people who think that black people are inferior. And of course they don’t believe me. But the markers and the science says that’s exactly how it happened, and that ---

HELEN: There was a recent program on, I think it is probably on Channel 10, because that is where you get the best programs that are giving you some good meat to work with, to that very effect. And the wonderful program that is happening now where they are tracing the DNA of the early black people, of where they originated. And the black people are able to identify their ancestry and find that their ancestry was just as good as any of our ancestry. And it is kind of eye opening to some folks.

MATT: Yes. Well when you said the PBS program about, along the same lines, that was the same guy. He did the film for public broadcasting. He is one of these people you love to hate, because ---

HELEN: Right.

MATT: --- or you hate to love. He was, you know, the perfect student, the perfect sportsman, he has the perfect wife, the perfect family, he is a PhD, he is a researcher, he is a film maker, he is everything, and he is very young. And you say how on earth could a person do all of this. Well I guess he's got to be at one end of the bell curve, and there other people of us who are at the other end of the bell curve.

HELEN: Right.

MATT: And then the rest of us fall somewhere in between.

HELEN: Right.

MATT: But he has done some wonderful work.

HELEN: Well that's what, that's, there again education. And we can thank technology for that. You know, even though it's, it was hard for me to learn to use the computer to write this book, but it was also very important to learn the computer to write this book. I couldn't have done it without it.

MATT: You don't seem like a person who would allow barriers to stand for very long if you wanted to be on the other side.

HELEN: No, my work with children guaranteed that. That's the beauty of teaching. Because you learn as an individual person, something from every child you teach, and they leave a mark of ...

MATT: Did you have any total disappointments?

HELEN: No. I think my greatest victory was a girl, a 5<sup>th</sup> grader who had a problem. She would learn, and then she would not know anything. And she would fail tests, and she came to me in 5<sup>th</sup> grade and she was reading at about a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade level. And the school had given up on her. Just nothing much you can do about it. Well she was a challenge to me. And I learned so many things in her physical background. I took her to Salem and enrolled her in a reading program. Because there were times when that child could read, and there were times when she couldn't do anything in the book. They were just not there for her. And I was bound and determined that there is no human being that can't be taught to read. You have to --- oh of course she had been through all the cycles of phonics, and no phonics, and this and that and all the other approaches to reading. But you have to find how that child learns. And there are children who cannot learn to read by phonetics. They don't learn to read. Well I tried everything there was, the kinetic of her tracing letters, and seeing ... that she didn't know "E" today, and again tomorrow, or what was impeding her learning.

And so --- I took her as I said to school at the University of Oregon. Enrolled her in a reading program. Well you know, they were the specialists, they were going to be able to tell me why this child didn't learn to read. And we did ultimately, I had said I think she has a brain damage somewhere. I think there are times when her, there are portions that don't connect. Well I find in old age the same thing is happening to me. I will know somebody's name, yesterday I couldn't have told you Bill's name to save my life. Every time I wanted to think of it, it was just a mental block. That was kind of the way Karen was. So, when it all ended she had, they came with a conclusion that the child could not be taught to read in a, any sustained level because it was not possible. And that

is what I had concluded was happening. I learned from her mother that they had dropped her, that she had fallen out of her crib at a very early age, and she did sustain some brain damage. I did finally get her into the right facilities to have some brain wave tests that she had never had before. And she did have a portion of her brain that had been damaged. And it is in the center of recall. Part of the time she knew it, and part of the time she didn't. And she still writes me letters. She couldn't spell cat.

I took her, I took her downtown in Eugene and pointed out where she was, and she had to remember the street names or she would be lost, and that she had to read them. I wrote them down so that she had them for reference, and let her out of the car. I didn't get away from her so I could lose her, she was twelve years old. And she did, had all kinds of devious ways to remember where she was. There was a clock up here in the corner, or there was something over here. She never read one single one of those street names to get herself back to where I was. I never saw her in my surveillance refer to this printed thing. So I asked her if she didn't find the street names up on the poles so that she would know where to turn. And she said, no they weren't there. But the clock might have been there, that, so she wasn't too far away so that she could find her way back.

And she couldn't learn to tell time. And her father just, oh he was abusive to the child, she was dumb, and she tried to be dumb, and she didn't want to learn and all these kinds of things. And I thought that was her mental block, was the fact that she wasn't accepted as an intelligent human being. But it wasn't that, she was darn smart. At that time you could go to the telephone and dial and get the time of day. Her dad asked her what time is it? And she would dial quickly and get the time and tell him what it was. I think she had more ways to survive than you can imagine.

MATT: So she was really bright?

HELEN: Yes, yes she is bright. And the only reason she ever learned anything to read I think was because she loved to cook. I got her cook books, and she couldn't cook without reading the directions. She married a man who accepted her disability. And he would read for her, he would cover for her, he never censored her because she didn't know what the word was in the cookbook, he would just supply it and she would go from there. And her letters now are fairly illiterate, but you can make out what she intended to say. So she has had a good life, and she's, she is a proud mother and grandmother, so she has been successful.

MATT: So for you being a teacher was more than just being the lesson plan teacher, you were an occupational therapist, you were a nurse, you were an investigator, a researcher, you were a musician, you were a gym teacher, you ---

HELEN: And I even learned how to jump over a hurdle. Because the little girls can learn the technique to jump over the hurdle. And when I was the track coach I didn't know how to jump over a hurdle either. But together we learned. I didn't get over the high hurdles, but I learned how to get over the low ones. Yes. And I think that anybody in education has to do that, I do. I think that any classroom teacher in the elementary school, and god knows they need some of those skills level, needs to do that kind of job if you're going to be an instructor. And if you're going, my I guess my creed is that you teach because you want that child to develop, and you want them to be excited about knowing and learning and exploring and evaluating so that they can make wise decisions. And if you don't do that you have --- I don't care how many times Bush says no child is



left behind, they're going to be left behind. Because "readin', writin', and 'rithmetic ain't going to do it in today's world, it just is not.

MATT: You were talking about economics a little while ago and about how the French looked down their noses, or didn't look down their nose at America. And I'm just struck by when Francois Mitterrand was complaining that the Americans don't understand business. And President Bush had a retort back to him. He said I don't know what the French were talking about, we don't know business he said. They don't know business they don't even have a word for entrepreneur. (Laughter) I don't know if that's true, that's probably just a joke.

HELEN: It might be appropriate.

MATT: Seems characteristic.

HELEN: Do you know that this little boy, right, where is he, he is a man here in Burns right now. Oh, Calvin Mosley. He must have his head behind somebody else. Oh there he is, right there.

MATT: And we are looking at page 184 of your book, the photograph on the right-hand side, that says first class 1935-1936.

HELEN: Calvin Mosley.

MATT: And, okay, and Calvin Mosley is from the left, one, two, three, about fifth from the left. I'm looking at it upside down.

HELEN: He is the second from the left in the front row.

MATT: Alright, okay, what about Calvin Mosley?

HELEN: Well he lives right here, and we have been friends for all these years. We have been just real good friends. And I wanted to see him, but he has cancer and he was not well enough to see yesterday.

MATT: Oh, I'm sorry.

HELEN: And I'm losing many of my kids.

MATT: Yeah.

HELEN: Uh huh.

MATT: The impact that you have had ---

HELEN: That is the gratifying thing, I taught for many years for peanuts. When I started at Hines Grade School I got \$75 a month for a nine month contract, and only \$25 of that was cash, the rest was warrants. And they were discounted as high as 15% to get any money to live on. And ---

MATT: When you say warrants, what was that ...

HELEN: That was a promissory note from the county that eventually they would have some school funds so they could pay you. That was all it was, it was just a warrant.

MATT: And they didn't have the money at the time.

HELEN: No, no nobody had any money. But there was a drugstore down town and the Hines Mill would give us \$20, we could give them a warrant for \$25 and they would give us \$25 cash. And I never taught in Hines Grade School for as much money as the sweeper at the mill was drawing, with benefits.

MATT: So labor was big here.

HELEN: Yes.

MATT: Labor was powerful here.

HELEN: Yes. The county ran, and the city ran on the income of the Hines Mill.

MATT: Do you think the teacher's unions had, have had an impact since then. And do you think that that would have been appropriate here then?

HELEN: No. There just wasn't any funds to operate with. And we were just lucky that we could all be able to continue eating, and living somehow. You know, if you did get \$25, and out of that \$25 I found a lady and a man that would let me live with them for a portion of that money. I think I paid \$20 a month of my cash so they would have some cash to buy groceries. And it wasn't --- those were hard times.

MATT: I was going to ask you about, that I wanted to know about your relationship in the depression, and how that worked out for you, and how that changed your life. So you were there at the crash in '29.

HELEN: Yes, right.

MATT: And then the depression evolved out of that. How did that affect Burns, and how did that affect you?

HELEN: Well at the time we crashed, my father was in mining in Battle Mountain, Nevada. He had just found a real rich vein of ore. And he had his cars, were on the side ready to be picked up at a good figure, and everything was jolly fine. And the next day those cars never moved on that track. And he had gone in debt to lay more track into this new vein. So the bank court got him and they came to our house, and they took everything. All the furnishings, everything. They could not take our beds, they could not take my mother's cook stove. And they could not take my dad's old Ford pickup because it was the only conveyance that they took --- the Model-A Ford the car that we had for us to ride in, they took everything. We were just absolutely strapped. And my family then

retreated to Denio. Oh they could not take mother's milk cows, they were her property so they could not take that, take them. And they could not take Dad's saddle horse nor his saddle. It was really, they stripped us. They took the furniture out of the living room in a settlement for his mining debt. So we were the poor. I think that if we had been on a ranch, still on the ranch we would not have felt the impact of the failure of the banks and all of that that happened, and the crash. But we did, we experienced that because we didn't have food. My dad would drive clear over to California somewhere and buy barrels of flour and sugar and so on when you could sell a horse, or he could sell a cow or what he could do after he came back to Denio. And it was very hard. And I worked for my board and room to go to my junior year in high school, my senior in high school. And when I went to normal school, to go to the normal school I had a cousin who would sign my loan, and I got a student loan. And my lord I went my first year at Monmouth I think for \$500 or something, you know. And today it is \$5,000 to open the door. But at any rate I got a good education and a good foundation to be a teacher from doing that. But then I qualified because of my ability to proof-read. I proof-read teacher's papers, marked the grammatical errors and was able to correct exams accurately, and got paid a little stipend. And would you believe that at the, at Monmouth in that day they made a way for me to stay. I got a pneumonia and in that day there were no antibiotics, so it was either die or live. And I was in the school infirmary for thirty days, and they provided a nurse because they knew I couldn't go to the hospital, I didn't have any money. And they provided and took care of me until I was able to. And they even took care of the time I had lost in classes so I didn't lose all of my credits. It was a wonderful experience in humanity. And I had so many people that stepped up to help me. The man who took

me out of the infirmary carried me out of there to help his wife, because she needed help. He carried me into his house, and I was unable to do a blessed think for over a month. I didn't help his wife, but he knew I needed help, so he took me home.

MATT: And you survived.

HELEN: And I survived, yep I did survive. So it was --- I think that also teaches you, I think every negative that you have happen in your life also teaches you how to accept the next positive. And if you don't learn that, you hear people complain, they die, or they are miserable all their lives or whatever happens to them. And I'm eating now at the center with people, or at the village, who don't find a positive thing out of the day, they don't. And they don't find anything good about the people. They'll call some little lady that, maybe that is all the shoes she has, I don't know, but she wears red shoes. So instead of calling her name they call her red shoes. Those are kinds of things children did on the playground. I don't like it.

MATT: Maybe as we were talking about before they were reverting to their ---

HELEN: Childhood.

MATT: To their childhood and their cave ways.

HELEN: Yeah, they do. I think that is another thing that makes it very hard to live in one of these institutions, is because they are so childish.

MATT: How would you change those kinds of institutions? What would be the ideal kind of place for you?

HELEN: I think I live in the ideal place, really. Because the administration is so mindful of those personality quirks, and they provide things that could be stimulating if you would accept them. And they try really hard to supplement us, and just as they have tried

so hard for me to have a garden, and I do have. I have five tomatoes, and two peppers, and etc. And they have to have care, they have to have care.

MATT: Is, a lot of it is just the individual mind set, isn't it. There are people who grow up all their lives being disappointed and angry. And then there are people who grow up and are just positive about anything that happens.

HELEN: Yeah, circumstances of your life have to be such that you can do that. And that is what I think has happened to the Negro. The circumstances of his life have been such that he can't find the positives. There is no light at the end of the tunnel, and so why not steal or why not do drugs, or why not take advantage of what is here now. It has no consequence to you because they see no hope, by whatever consequence that is administered.

MATT: I'm not an authority of black recidivisms, or economic crime and so forth. But from what I do understand, you know, people talk about well there are more black in prison than there are whites, and therefore blacks must be prone to crime. But you also look and say well there are more blacks who are living in poverty, and so you can say that poverty leads to crime far more than you could the color of a person's skin leads to crime. But people don't want to look at that part, they have prejudices.

HELEN: Well they have to, as a country we have to do it. But my goodness I was at the table in my facility just about two weeks ago, and there was --- Barack Obama --- she said, "We're not ever going to have a black man in the White House of the United States of America." And all three of them concurred.

MATT: Those were people at your table.

HELEN: Yes. And I said, boy ---

MATT: It's very difficult for many of the older generation to accept that.

HELEN: Well yes it is.

MATT: Grow up with those prejudices.

HELEN: I was just shocked that all three of them concurred. I said, "Well I don't agree, I do not agree." I think it will be the best thing that ever happened in this country if that black man takes the lead and he does a good job, if they don't tie his hands so he can't do a good job. And they could do that. And the power, the power in this country still lays in the hands of white people, and they could stack the deck against him on every turn. I hope they won't.

MATT: We've done that many times.

HELEN: Yes.

MATT: I did a program for PBS on the Japanese internment camps of World War II, and how, what a thinly disguised excuse that was to do a racial program against the Japanese-Americans who were of course totally innocent. There was no fifth column and the FBI already knew who the Japanese activists were. And yet they put 110,000 people in camps.

HELEN: That's right. One right here in this county.

MATT: Yes, yes. A good friend of mine is a surgeon in Ontario, and he went through a camp and then came out when the war was over, he came out and joined his father in practice in Ontario. The stories are by the thousands, and they're all amazing. And yet that wasn't the only one. I mean ---

HELEN: And this camp was better than the average, the one in Harney County. Those people were treated pretty well.

MATT: Where was it.

HELEN: Out between here and Seneca.

MATT: Do you know what it was called?

HELEN: Jap Camp. He worked out of the Jap Camp. But they varied their labor, and I think on the whole they did like everything else in Harney County. We're not race prejudice here much. And I don't think very much at all. We're political. We're more Republican than we are Democrat I think in Harney County, that would be the statistics I think.

MATT: Being more conservative than the rule.

HELEN: Uh huh. But we're also accepting of each other as I have experienced my life in this county. More than any place than I have ever been.

MATT: Where were you when the war broke out?

HELEN: We were here in Burns. My husband was out goose hunting. (Laughter) And they heard it, somebody had the radio on, and it came over the radio, so they pulled up their decoys and came back to town. And here we are, we're in the war.

MATT: Now you had already been married for quite awhile then?

HELEN: Yes, yes, I was married in 1938.

MATT: And so, so had you already purchased the jewelry store?

HELEN: Yes, my husband had the jewelry store before we married. I came ---

MATT: That's right.

HELEN: --- I came back here to teach. And if you read the Hines School thing you read about our principal that I had such a hard time with.

MATT: Yes.



HELEN: But he taught me something too, you know. He taught me survival skills that are valuable. So you have to learn that everything you do in life I think. And now I'm trying to learn what there is in a retirement center.

MATT: Who was your favorite president, did you have one?

HELEN: No, I can't say that I do. They all had their strength and weaknesses. Some of them did a good job with this facet of American life. And another one didn't do as well maybe. But then they blame the president for everything, and they all say Bush is responsible. But it isn't, it's the regime. And he --- but he was stupid. But he isn't a very bright man, he didn't do well in high school, he didn't do well in college. He never has excelled --- how we got him, I don't know. And I hate to have this on record, I must not say anymore. (Laughter) My sister ever listened to it she'd have a fit.

MATT: Well I don't think you're expressing ideas that are yours alone.

HELEN: No, I realize that. It's, now he is down to 27%, the lowest of anybody that has ever been in the presidency.

MATT: And to think that his was the highest right after 9-11.

HELEN: Oh my goodness yes. We had a catastrophe that he could build on. But then when the catastrophe was in the Gulf States he surely failed completely. The regime failed completely.

MATT: What do you think brought America to where it is today, and how do you think we need to change our course?

HELEN: Well I think the biggest thing, as I said previously, that has contributed to America's failure is the way we have done the black people. That has probably been our biggest stumbling block. And we didn't do a good job with that. I am hopeful that we're

on the threshold of when we're going to do a much better job with that ethnicity business. A great deal depends on how we handle the Mexican population, and what we do about our borders. I suspect, and I don't have a great deal of empirical evidence to support this statement, that the next thing we have to get done, because we have such a problem with the middle east now, the next thing we have to get done is to secure our borders so that we have national safety to a larger degree. And in that we've got to solve the problem of immigration. And if we don't we are going to continue to just, up and down.

MATT: There are so many things I want to ask you about, how are you doing? Are you holding up okay?

HELEN: Health wise?

MATT: No, I mean just talking here.

HELEN: Oh, I'm enjoying it.

MATT: Well good. Okay.

HELEN: Because I enjoy, I've always enjoyed --- but this is the contribution my father made to my life. He would energize discussions at the table. Drove my mother crazy. But he would cause us to debate. You made a statement, what do you know, what can you prove that substantiates that statement. And you could debate it. And those debates drove my mother wild. But I have always enjoyed intellectual discussions. My son would say, "Mother whenever you got ready to chastise me it was an intellectual discussion." Sitting on the edge of the bathtub. (Laughter) But I enjoy, I have enjoyed our encounter.

MATT: What do you prognosticate as the future of Burns and Harney County?

HELEN: It will survive, it will survive.

MATT: How will it change form do you think?

HELEN: Not a great deal for a ... time. In Burns everything is evolution, not revolution. And I think, I see very little that has changed in the 40 years I have been gone. It's, I don't even think that our city council is effective as it used to be. Because I don't think you have individuals serving on the council who are, I don't know how well educated they are. I don't know how well versed they are in what happens. But they're, as I read the newspaper it is so superficial. Their decision making doesn't seem to me to be as well founded as it used to be.

MATT: So you're saying that Burns sort of goes on without any need for their intervention.

HELEN: ... what?

MATT: Without any need for their intervention?

HELEN: Of the ---

MATT: Of the city council?

HELEN: Oh no, no, no. You have to have, you have to have intervention. Whether the dog issue, or the horse issue, or whatever issue. And you have to have some long-term planning. And they have done some very good things in the last 20 years in PRIDE. They have an organization here called PRIDE. And they do a good job. They are, the people there are basically thinkers and doers, and influencing. And maybe they have enough influence on the City Council. But it is hard to get people to volunteer to do these things. That takes a lot of time and effort. And a lot of people just don't. And then somebody gets, wants to run for the council because they have an axe to grind. Well that

is not good government. It's what is happening though nationally, state-wide. We don't have our best people going, getting into office in this country. And we don't have smart people, really intelligent people who get into public office.

MATT: Why is that?

HELEN: I don't know. I honestly don't know. I have asked myself that question a jillion times. Why is it that the best minds are not governing us.

MATT: I have a suspicion I'd like to put before you and get your reaction to that.

HELEN: Thank you.

MATT: I suspect that one of the reasons we don't have good minds leading us in government, is because they don't want to expose their lives the way that we expect to cut open, and lay open, and filet politicians who run for office.

HELEN: Oh I think that has been a tremendous contributing factor, yes I do.

MATT: So we don't seem to want to choose the best people anymore, we want to seem to ---

HELEN: Cut them down at the knees.

MATT: Yes, yes. And then ---

HELEN: Look at the petty things they are doing now, running these short blobs on television now against Barack Obama. Just have nothing to do with decision making in this country. And accusing his wife of not being a patriot, and all of those kinds of things. And we don't have, we have not done a good enough job in educating our students to be thinkers. We teach to mediocrity. Not that --- refers me back again to the things that I say that we don't do a good job with the intellectually elite. And if we did a better job with that, we'd have better leadership in this country. But no, you cut the

program out right away because you can't afford it. So you teach to the average. I did not ever do that in my classroom, never. I did not teach to the average group. I hauled these little kids up here from down here who couldn't learn very well. Who had learning problems, or we had emotional problems, whatever kind of problems, bring them along the best I could. And then these kids up at the top I opened the gate. They had every opportunity to explore knowledge. And the average group would just come along because that's where they are. And that's why this no child left behind was destined to be bad, because they put a benchmark up here. All of these people have to be here, all of these people have to be here. That's not good for a democracy. That's fatal to a democracy. Because you forever have the people who were born with less abilities, with less intelligence shall we say actually, to make decisions. But you have this group up here who should be fostered and nurtured and developed to do that kind of job while all the rest of us help.

MATT: One of the big downsides of standardizations, you cram everyone into a social mold, and you don't make any provision for those who don't fit.

HELEN: Well even back when I was teaching my, taking my teaching training, that was the basis of our training was that you taught each child as he was. You didn't put him in a procrustean bed and make him fit. You took him where he was, and developed him along his potential.

MATT: Why do you think that has changed? I mean it's, you know the one child, no child left behind is one of the big things against it is that a unfounded mandate, they make all the rules, but there is no way to pay for the rules.

HELEN: But they didn't make the rules that make any sense. There is so much --- no there is just really --- now a word is escaping me --- when it's destined to failure. Whenever you have a benchmark that everybody has to work, then you have put the whole society in procrustean bed, and tried to make them fit. And so that's destined to failure. And how in the name of heaven are these un-financed, under financed, poorly staffed schools going to bring this bunch of kids up here that need this bunch of kids that were educated in the way they ought to be educated. And then they're all going to be all together, not anybody left behind. And there is tyranny in testing. That was the word I was after, was tyranny. There is tyranny in testing. There are children with wonderful capabilities who don't pass academic testing very well. But they have tremendous potential to be developed. Well all of these children now are supposed to pass the same daggone test and all throughout the country. Well what is good for testing in Tennessee is certainly not good in Portland, Oregon. And so, what have you accomplished? You've defeated your purpose when you start, and the kid gets ground in the machinery.

MATT: Certainly there are people, academicians, who study and understand education who must be rolling over with this ---

HELEN: Oh, they are. And Oregon is in total revolt. We were doing a better job than the no child left behind ever put it, but it has impaired our ability to function.

MATT: So why does that bad idea win over the good idea? I've never quite understood that.

HELEN: Dollars, dollars, dollars. Money, money.

MATT: And that is how, how does that happen? You mean because it is federally tax supported or not, or ---

HELEN: Well I think that's probably true. Federal, federal --- Bigger is never better. I don't honestly believe bigger is better. I honestly believe that Hines Grade School did a better job of educating kids, kids --- grades one through eight, than they are able to do now that they have consolidated these schools. But they have consolidated them to save money. And so you have to water down this project, you have to hire less competent teachers. You have to offer less programs. There again, you are doing exactly what I was pointing out to a minute ago. You're putting the whole playing field into mediocrity, rather than expertise.

MATT: My impression also is that at the same time that everything you say is happening this is also the time when parents are expecting the schools to do more and more because they have time to be less ---

HELEN: Now you've opened another can of worms.

MATT: Well, let's dig in to the bottom of it.

HELEN: Well when I first taught, my parents were so supportive, and it didn't matter if the teacher said, you do it, the teacher said. You had some influence in the child's life, and the parents supported you in that. If they disagreed with you, they came to you and said this isn't good for Johnny, my Johnny, what can we do about it? They don't do that anymore. In fact just before I stopped teaching at Hines School, I had met up with a parent who came, and it was the only one in my teaching experience --- it was very painful. She just horse-whipped me to death. I was a very poor teacher, I hadn't done anything I needed to do for her daughter, blah, blah, blah. And that was very hard for me, because I had, in spite of everything whatever we were saying about individualizing instruction, and meeting each child's needs, you still have to make decisions that are

appropriate to the whole. And so I would say to parents, I don't make a rule any day that isn't detrimental to some kid in this room. Because that's not what they need, it's not the way you live at home, it's not something else, and something else in this child's individual life. But he has to give a little for the good of the whole. And this is what we have to have happen in all of education today. These big schools have got to give a little, of the little schools, or somebody, all the way along to have it work for everybody, something work for everybody. But not to try to put them all in the same mold. So --- and better teacher training. The young women and men who are coming into education at the time I left teaching were not nearly as well prepared as I had been, not nearly.

MATT: Was it easier to be prepared then?

HELEN: Uh huh.

MATT: It seems that life today is so complex that ---

HELEN: It's the nature of the teacher training institution to --- they, I went, I was fortunate enough to go to a teacher training school. That was their expertise. Now Monmouth has a school of philosophy, a school of medicine, a school of god knows what else, but they just bring along the school of education. It's not as expert as it used to be, because they wanted to have university status so you have to have more schools, broader offerings. And so you don't hire the expert in every one of the fields that are offered in these institutions. But Monmouth hired experts in every facet of their educational program, because that's all we did was education. And we did come out better prepared, because we had better schools, better --- If you had a teacher in philosophy that was the best teacher available in philosophy, or in math or science, or whatever. And now they can't afford them. They just --- it's like we have here in grade school. They hire the



teacher that will come for the least money. It's not necessarily their expertise. And I don't know how bad that is here yet, because I think Burns is still doing a pretty fair job at school.

MATT: You talked a little while ago about different kinds of educational programs. And in my lifetime I've seen so many different experiments in education.

HELEN: Oh yes.

MATT: And by and large they have come and gone, and they have pretty much gone all the way.

HELEN: Like phonics.

MATT: Huh?

HELEN: It evolves.

MATT: Did you see ---

HELEN: But everything, but everything had to be, you couldn't teach reading without phonics. And you didn't dare even try to teach the child who can't learn by phonics. If a child is right brained or left brained, it depends on how he learns. He can't learn by phonics, because he can't, he doesn't understand it. It doesn't equate in his brain. And so they have finally reached the place where --- if you do phonics where it is appropriate, but you don't tie your whole program to phonetic presentation of the reading situation. And it has been like that through I think most of the disciplines.

MATT: So do you think that there is one fundamental approach to teaching that through the years has worked the best regardless of all these other approaches?

HELEN: You mean like in teaching reading specifically?

MATT: No. In teaching anything.

HELEN: In teaching anything I think just goes back to what I said before in summation, is that you teach the child in the manner in which he can learn. And you motivate him to want to learn for the sake of learning. Why did you get a home assignment? I don't know, it isn't any good to me. Well that child should know why he has a home assignment. He should have investigated, the teacher should have investigated and said, "Johnny, you don't know how to divide, so you need to do some practice, you need to learn the concept of what division is, you need to think division, and so you have to practice it." "If you want to play ball, you got to throw the ball." Well if you want to learn how to divide you got to do some division." Well then maybe if that penetrates that child's life in some way he will want to divide. And if it doesn't he'll give up division and use a calculator.

MATT: So what I think I hear you saying is that one thing that teachers don't do so much these days that they used to, is to understand each of their students.

HELEN: That's true, that's true. And a teacher will defend her position and say, "I have too many children." By golly I taught as many as 35 kids in a self-contained classroom. And you can do it if that's your philosophy, if that's your basic concept of what you're doing. If you want every kid to just --- if you want your day to be easy, and just have every kid do the same thing, then you can turn them out like you grind out anything else.

MATT: Of course you didn't have the federal requirements to fill out all the paperwork for everyday.

HELEN: Oh, that's a god awful thing. There again you come back to the business of money, money.

MATT: Yeah.

HELEN: If you're going to demand all of this paperwork then you should provide the funds to do it.

MATT: Yeah.

HELEN: Not burden the teacher with it. I think another thing that's caused a lot of failure in the educational system is the fact that you have too many children who are handicapped in some way, impaired, whether it's in learning ability, whether it's in hearing or sight or whatever. Now --- and even, my goodness teachers have to take these children who are spastic. My god, they can't do anything. But you're taking time away from the children who can do. Now those children need to be in special programs away from the average classroom. But now the philosophy is this child grows in the environment of the classroom. Fiddle. That child is more comfortable --- I have a grandson who is, was born with spina bifida . His parents did not do a good job because he was in a broken home more than any other reason, I suppose, of helping him accept his limitations. He doesn't want to be. In fact he just graduated from high school, and he is in a wheel chair. But he insisted on walking across the stage, when he can't really walk. But he is not going to be different from anybody else. Well he ought to have been proud to roll his darn wheel chair across there. Because he has not learned self-acceptance. And these --- now he has been exposed to basketball in a wheel chair. And he may get a wheel chair scholarship to go to college. It's the first time he has been in his own environment, and he is better off. He really is better off. But they have kept him in the public school where he has always felt at a loss. And that's not a, I don't think it's productive. I think that this --- maybe they'll learn that. Now they're trying to, in the

State of Oregon, close the blind school, and have it all be in the blind and deaf school, and all of these kinds of experimental things that they know better.

MATT: Or should.

HELEN: Yes. But we don't comment as much as we should.

MATT: You were very fond of mustangs, as I remember. Tell me about your fondness for those horses.

HELEN: A mustang is not a mustang. Let me go on record as saying so. A mustang is a combination of a feral, horses, they're off of these livestock ranches all throughout the West. And you'll find all kinds of blooded animals in those mustangs. And to think that they're really mustangs is, I don't know. It is preposterous. But at any rate we ran mustangs. I've gathered mustangs, and we've shipped them to Winnemucca, and I've trailed to --- my sister and I when I was only ten years old we trailed a hundred head of mustangs, mustangs, mind you. They were wild horses, and they'd break and run when a rabbit jumped up or they'd break and run when a car passed on the road, or something else. And you had to be a good rider to take those mustangs to Winnemucca to put them in the cattle cars. They're the horse cars to peddle them in California, actually is where we shipped. And my dad, if you ever have time to read his story, it's fascinating because he was a real mustanger. He knew how a horse thinks, he could ride the range, find where the breaks are, and know where that horse is going to run. And station his riders to turn those horses so that you could bring them under control, if you had a horse, back enough to do it. Because your horse is carrying a saddle and a rider, and the mustang is free to run his very level best. And they can many times outrun you. But if you know where they are going to run to, you can turn them. And then you can turn them back on

another rider who can, whose horse isn't winded by now, and he can give them another go. And we have brought as many as fifty head of horses down out of the mountain top here, and put them under control. I made as many as 75 mile rides in a day.

MATT: Wow.

HELEN: Yes, I have when I was a kid. And we'd bring in more horses than anybody else, because my dad knew the horses, he knew mustangs. He knew that a mustang will always run uphill, he'll never run down if he can help it. He is going to run uphill as sure as you are born, and things like that. And you take the average cowboy, even back in those days in Harney County, they didn't know how to run a mustang. My dad could bring in three horse to every one that anybody else could bring in. And you had to bring them in, because your gentle horses were all mixed up with them. And if you couldn't out run them you lost your gentle horses. And then my dad was also a breeder of mustangs. He would turn, he bought a horse, he bought a horse one time called Forest Fire Sale, who had been retired from the race track, and he put that stud out on the mountain to breed those mustangs to a better breed. They were inter-bred after so long a time. And other ranchers were doing the same thing, they turned their good studs out on the hill to breed those mares, to bring in better stock. And now the wild horse program is a drain on society, because good lord we're paying as much money to take care of one of these horses out here, as we are to educate a kid for a year. Now that is some kind of insanity too, isn't it? Because, and the horses will breed and get too many for the range, and they have to be controlled. But the ranchers are benefited to control their range. And BLM has nothing at stake, because it is a federally mandated financed program. So

you've got a thousand dollars in this dumb horse that never had a rope on him.

(Laughter) And so, anyway it was fun.

MATT: Did you see yourself as something of a mustang in your life?

HELEN: The independence of the horse?

MATT: Uh huh.

HELEN: Well maybe, I don't know the answer to that question. But I know that what my father did for indoctrination for each of his children when they were born, he set that baby up between a horse's ears, of his really best saddle horse, and say when you develop as much horse sense as this fella's got, you'll be alright. (Laughter) That was our baptism.

MATT: It sounds like you had a good deal of horse sense in your life.

HELEN: Well it has served me well, it has served me well. My dad's lessons have served me well. I never would have, I never would have survived the transition from The Dalles to a retirement center in Salem without it. I wouldn't, because it's tough. That's the, that's the, it's your last hurdle, but I think it's your hardest, is your preparation for uselessness. (Laughter) When I left The Dalles, I was managing the music program at the senior center, and booking all of the concerts, all the presentations. I was on the council to the board. I refused to be on the board because it was too time consuming. But I was the parliamentarian, and I was the council and the lawyer, so to speak, for the board. And I was playing bridge three times a week, and totally involved in the community. In my church I was a challis bearer once a month, one week a month, yeah once a month. And did all the flowers for the altar. Busy! And then you leave this busyness, this purpose of life, with purpose everyday. Things you have to get done. And

in the meantime writing the book in the middle of all this, and go to nothing, you know.

No reason to even get up.

MATT: But you always seem to find a reason.

HELEN: Well you have to.

MATT: You just have to.

HELEN: Yeah, you have to find a reason for life.

MATT: Is there anything that we have not talked about that you would like to?

HELEN: Heavens, I don't think that we have hit all the high spots, and the low. No, I don't know of anything, really.

MATT: Well this has been a real treat to talk with you. I appreciate your coming all the way over from Salem to do this.

HELEN: Well I appreciate having my daughter arrange it so I could come. Because, oh I think one of the other hardest things I've had to accept here lately is has been the fact that her health has fallen apart. She is having to use a cane. She has less stamina than I do. And there was a time, until she came to grips with the fact that she had to retire. She was in state government, and they --- just less funding and this and that, and she was putting in longer hours, and her health was failing. And I actually changed my will, I thought I was going to out-live her. And now she is physically somewhat damaged because of the lifestyle she has led. And pulled, trying to pull out of it. But I had no, no --- she was worse off than I was. In fact she had two surgeries in ten months. And she couldn't even drive. And there I was stranded out in a retirement center, with nobody. But it's harder to accept the fact that your child has more problems than you do. Not that she would admit it. She thinks that she has to manage me pretty well. But --- and I appreciate that

management most of the time. Occasionally I object. And I was not able to get another thing that would have made it harder for her. I was not able to convey to her that I thought she had done a good thing by making me move there, you know. Because I hadn't accepted it, I had no way to convey it, because I didn't want to be there either, much. I knew I had to be, and I knew I was better off. And I think that it is a decision I had to reach that she is better off, because when I was in The Dalles she worried about me constantly, and yet she was unable to do anything about it. Now that I'm in Salem she is just across town. And if I need something she could come over there and do it. And that makes her happier and easier. And I think when you reach, and you probably have to find this with your parents, when they reach the place that they can't function then they have to accept your --- and then you as a parent have to pull in your resources enough to know that you're doing something for them. Because you really are. You need their help, but you aren't accepting it. And when you need it you better accept it gracefully, or else it's harder even on them so that's not fair.

MATT: Lessons we all have to learn.

HELEN: Well it's hard, and some don't. Now my sister that you met here yesterday, she hasn't accepted that at all, no way. It's her way or the highway. And that's not fair. Her daughter is just pushed to the nth degree all the time, because her demands are very great and that's not fair to make demands on the next generation. I had the most wonderful thing happen to me though, when it came time that I needed help. I had two grandchildren who wanted me to come and live with them. Well I knew better than to do that too, because you can't fit a life of taking care of an older person. You can, I did it for over three years, took my father-in-law. Best thing I ever did, and I don't regret it at



all. But it was as much of an adjustment to take an old person into your home as it is to have a baby, and maybe more.

MATT: Hmm.

HELEN: Because they have mind-sets that need to be met, and the baby you can govern. And the older person you can't govern, you've got to make their lives happy too. And all, both of the members of the family work, you're home alone, all the time alone. And then when they get home they've got to fit you around --- we'll it's ridiculous. I wouldn't even consider living with either one of them. But it was so wonderful to know that they thought I would fit, you know. That their lives could accommodate me, and it's a wonderful compliment. But, it wouldn't have been a fair thing to do, I had no intention of doing it. But the interesting part of this, my daughter really thought that she had to intercede, because maybe I would do it. (Laughter)

MATT: I want to point out your book again. Your beautiful bound volume here in the library. "My Story" by Helen Felt. And it is Helen (Smith) Felts auto-biography. And how does this relate to the smaller volumes that were out there?

HELEN: I knew that there were extractions there that would be more interesting to people. And I didn't feel, I don't even yet feel that this volume is very interesting to anybody except family or somebody who is interested in a way of life that is perishing or something. But the history of Hines School, the history of Denio, and what else did I extract --- oh my parents. There's the only recognition that they have had is by me writing this really, and I felt that that was important.

MATT: Wonderful.

HELEN: In the volume by itself.

MATT: Yeah. Well we've been talking with Helen Smith Felt on this 28<sup>th</sup> day of June, 2008, in the Harney County Library, in the Chester and Helen Felt Oral History Recording Room, that is placed here in the library courtesy of Chester and Helen Felt.

HELEN: And their children.

MATT: And their children. And thank you so much for sitting with this, with us for this interview. And we hope it is productive to ---

HELEN: Somebody.

MATT: --- people into the future. And is reflective of a very interesting time in the town of Burns and the life of Helen Smith Felt. Thank you very much.

(End of DVD)

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