

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #81 - Side A

Subject: Reverend Louis Perkins

Place: Burns, Oregon

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Interviewer: Barbara Eggleston

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BARBARA EGGLESTON: This is Barbara Eggleston, and I'm visiting with the Reverend Louis Perkins on August 25th, 1979 in Burns, Oregon, about the history of St. Andrews Episcopal Church. Mr. Perkins, when did you first come to Burns?

REVEREND LOUIS PERKINS: We came to Burns on the day of a big dust storm, on the 30th of June 1954. Everything went up in the air. One of those typical Burns dust storms, the 30th of June 1954.

BARBARA: Well now, where did you come from, where were you ---

REVEREND: Well, I was associate in a large parish outside of Philadelphia. And I had been there three years, and I wanted to get back toward the West, where I had begun in Green River, Wyoming in 1926. So, I had this interview with Bishop Laughton, and he said come out here and see what they have. And we looked over several places. And they had a big parish supper here at Burns, put on the dog and so forth. But anyway, that was in April '54, and then after some various, thinking things over, saying a prayer and so forth, I said to my wife, "Let's go to Burns." So, we came all the way across the country and up to the Cove Summer School and talked to Bishop Arden, and he talked to Carol Jordan down here, so we got down here on the 29th of June, and came into town in a great big dust storm. That was our introduction to Burns.

BARBARA: Now where --- tell me about where you came from originally.

REVEREND: Well, my home was just outside of Boston, in Brookline. That's about ... Harvard in the class of '24. But I graduated in '33, then to the Episcopal theological school and finished there in June '26.

Then we were in Green River for two years, and then in the Diocese of Pittsburgh for nine years, and then I was in the Diocese of Connecticut for eight years, and then up in the Diocese of Central New York for nine years, and then we went down to associate a large parish in ... Pennsylvania. And it was at that time that with my wife's sickness that we decided that we'd go to some small place. And one thing led to another and Bishop Bob said, "Come on out to the West," and where we'd begun, you see, my ministry in '26. And so we came out here to see him in Baker in April of that year, and we talked over several vacancies he had. One was in Burns; another was in Madras, and so forth. So eventually we came to Burns on the 29th of June, the day of the big dust storm, in 1954.

BARBARA: All right. When we were chatting yesterday, you mentioned that there was quite a coincidence between someone you knew ---

REVEREND: Yes, when I was a boy in All Saint's Church in Brookline, Massachusetts, well I was about 8 or 9 years old, and I had a wonderful Sunday school teacher by the name of Miss Charlotte Brown. And I remember one time, somewhere along --- she sort of disappeared. She'd gone out West somewhere, and I'd found out afterward, she'd gone to North Dakota to work under Bishop Ponce Tyler, and he was there for several years. Well, she was there for several years, and then she came to work under Bishop Remington here in Eastern Oregon. And she worked in Heppner, and in Ontario, and then she came to make some of the beginnings of the organized church here in Burns. So, when I came to Burns, in June, July 1954, I remember looking over, around the church, and the Altar Guild was getting ready for Sunday services and I went up and I looked at the cross on the altar and it said, "In memory of Miss Charlotte Brown". Golly, it was my Sunday school teacher. So, the world is small.

BARBARA: Yes, it is. Now what was the church life like when you first became associated

with...

REVEREND: Let's see, Burns was a pretty isolated community in those days. There seemed to be here, a real nucleus of fine, loyal people, and the town was a city. Let's see, I would say Burns, at that time, was not more than perhaps about 2500 people. I had been to a small town before, I loved small town life, and in fact my ministry has been almost always in small town life. But Burns seemed very isolated at that time. But I love the small town life and reaching out into the community. And after I got started, I remember looking over the parish list, oh, I would say there was probably 100 families or more, and they were scattered in various places. Well, for instance, after I'd made some calls around town, I saw that some families lived out in Drewsey. That's 60 miles out that way, and I noticed one had a telephone, so I called the operator and I said to her, "Get so and so out in Drewsey." And she said, "The telephone line is out of order." And like a big city man, I said, "Will it be fixed tomorrow?" "Oh, no," she said, "they're all haying now. It won't be fixed till August, maybe." And so that was my introduction to a small community with a telephone. So, I decided, well, the only way to see the people in Drewsey was to go out there. So, I went out the next day and called on several families in Drewsey.

And then I went down toward the bird refuge and there were scattered families, well Mrs. Stewart, she's still living, Ruth Stewart, way down the White Horse Ranch, 142 miles.

BARBARA: Was that one way?

REVEREND: One way, each way.

BARBARA: Oh my goodness!

REVEREND: Oh, then we had some families up, well Jessie Cecil, out here. She lived out at Riley, and let's see, there were some families, whenever they're scattered that way, they were out --- Mrs. McWilliams, she's still living down at Diamond. So, the families are scattered all over Harney County. I loved to come and go that way.

But I would say after perhaps four or five months, I had a chance to get all the way to Fields. That's way down to the Nevada line.

BARBARA: Yes.

REVEREND: There was a Roman Catholic priest here at that time, Father Egan. Did you know him at all?

BARBARA: Yes, I knew him.

REVEREND: He was here 27 years. Well, that was in the days before Pope John, and there wasn't that ecumenical feeling between the churches. But, here was a tribute to father Egan. The day after we got into Burns, there was a knock at the door, and a good Irish accent said, "Is Mr. Perkins at home?" And I said, "Yes." "Well, I'm Father Egan, and I just wanted to welcome you to Burns." And I nearly collapsed. It was marvelous to see a Roman Catholic priest coming to welcome me to Burns the day after I got here. And we were bosom friends.

BARBARA: That's really interesting.

REVEREND: Well, what I was leading up to, Father Egan was that same kind. He went all over the county, all over the place. I remember when he had a, some sort of a 25th Anniversary of his priesthood, and his parish gave him a car, a brand new car, mainly because he'd been going all over the place. By the way, gasoline wasn't a dollar a gallon then. If I remember, gasoline was about 25 cents a gallon, even that seemed high. But that was Burns.

And for a person from New England, now, I understand Harney County, if you cut off Cape Cod, Harney County is about the same size as Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut.

BARBARA: Oh, it is?

REVEREND: And here is Burns and Hines. I think there are about 3000 people, and the other 3000, somebody said, well, they're scattered all over the county. And Father Egan was a great inspiration to me to get out and see the people. But, that was Burns in those day.

BARBARA: What kinds of services, do you think, meant the most to you?

REVEREND: Well, let me go back a bit and say this. I have an expression that 99% of the ministry is pastoral. And I've always made my ministry out around other people. First, the person door-to-door, ranch-to-ranch, and then, of course, Sunday services. We used to, as I came here, if I

remember, my first wife Hazel played the organ, but they did have another organist. But, we used to have, usually, services at eight and ten every Sunday. Then we used to go out during the week as much as possible. We'd have occasional services at the, there's a community church at Drewsey. We used to have community services sometimes down at the schoolhouse down at Andrews.

BARBARA: Oh, you did, that's quite a ... too?

REVEREND: Yes, but I'm just emphasizing the pastoral ministry. That's the thing I love. I often had the expression, "That that's 99% of the ministry."

BARBARA: Uh, now ---

REVEREND: St. Andrews Church, at that time, was the small church that burned. I would say that church seated about, well if you put the people in closely, I would say you could seat probably 125-130 people. We used to have young people with 15 or 20 in the choir, and, well I've always kept a desk diary from way back to January 1932. I was looking over some statistics the other day in my desk diaries in '54 and '55. Oh, I'm not trying to brag, but I would say we had probably 50-60 people out to services on an average Sunday. 15-20 at early service, and 50-60 sometimes 70, I've looked in the desk diary, so I'm not counting the pillars the way some ministers do. But those are actually counting noses.

BARBARA: Well, in other words, you had, it was quite active?

REVEREND: It seemed to be, it seemed to be. Yes. There were lots of young people. For instance, I remember the year after I was here, well I guess it, no I guess it was that first summer, the young people wanted to have a picnic. And I said, "Where will we go?" And they said, "Let's go to Fish Lake." That's way out in the Steens, have you ever been there?

BARBARA: Uh huh.

REVEREND: And the Jordan's, Carol Jordan said, "Well, come and see us about a tent." So the young people took us out to the Steens, and it was a beautiful day in July. By the time we got to Fish Lake, it was snowing!

BARBARA: Oh, really!

REVEREND: And we went to the Jordan's tent and stayed in their tent for an hour or so, and we couldn't very well have a picnic in the snow, so the youth said, "Let's go down to the P Ranch, or the Double O", the P Ranch was down at the foot of the mountain. So, we had our picnic in the lovely sunlight, but we left the snowstorm up here at Fish Lake. That was about the 15th of July.

There were a lot of young people, and a lot of fine, faithful, older people. It was a good working parish; I loved it.

BARBARA: Now was there any remodeling, or any change of the church itself when you were there, in the building?

REVEREND: Well, the only thing we did was, we put up a bell. I always thought it would be nice to have a church bell. The Roman Catholics had a bell, and the Presbyterians had a bell, and the Baptists had a bell, and I thought, well, why not? And one thing led to another.

The Union Pacific then was giving up their hand bells; they were now using these other sort of things. And so, I got in touch with somebody at the station and he said, "Yes, we'll get you a freight engine bell, if you'll pay for the freight." And one day they called up from the station and said, "Your ding dong is here." And so we got this bell out of, it was a, well a freight engine bell. The only trouble was, that every time they rang the bell for church services, it sounded like a freight engine bell. So we built a little tower up over the entranceway. Mr. Raspberry, who was in the Forest Service helped us, and Carol Rose, who is the present young priest at Canyon City right now, who will be here tomorrow, he helped us. And we got the bell up there, and it worked. As I say, every time we pulled the rope, it was like a freight engine bell.

But, that was the main thing we did on there, and then we put an outside sign with moveable letters. And I think some, oh yes, we put a lot of, I remember the young people helped, we put a lot of insulation, very cold winters of course, up in the top and put insulation all between the 2 x 4's. And so that the --- let's see, the first winter I was there, it was down to 30 below one Sunday. It was cold winters in Burns. How long have you been here now?

BARBARA: I've been here 31 years this fall.

REVEREND: Well, you know how it is. So, that the insulation, the bell tower, and the painting, and let's see we did some work around in the parish hall. Of course, the old church was church, parish hall, and rectory, all in one building.

BARBARA: Wasn't there a, didn't you have, didn't Burns host the convocation in...

REVEREND: Yes. They tell me that the first convocation ---

BARBARA: Were you still here?

REVEREND: Yes. Before I came here they had the convocation in 1949, but I came here in '54 to '60, they had convocation in '58. And through Mr. Slater's auspices we used the grade school up here. There's a big gymnasium, I think, in there, and we fitted that up as a church. The radar station was up here in the hills and we got a lot of Army blankets and so forth, and folded them up and made kneeling benches. And then the different churches provided meals. That is the Lutheran Church had one meal, and the Presbyterian women had another meal and so forth. Oh, I would say we had maybe 200 people that came from all around the district.

BARBARA: Was this the ---

REVEREND: This was the annual convocation.

BARBARA: Of Eastern ---

REVEREND: Of all of Eastern Oregon. That includes about 30 congregations scattered around. There are about 10 parishes and about 20 non self-supporting parishes. That was in 1958. But the church was too small for the congregation, so we had all our worship services, and our meals, and our business sessions all up there in the Burns Grade School.

BARBARA: In a small town, people seem to cooperate.

REVEREND: It was wonderful, it was wonderful. Oh yes, and we had our banquet in the Roman Catholic parish hall under Father Egan's auspices. We were just, worked together in a wonderful ecumenical way. Father Egan was a marvelous man, one of the most lovely Christian men I've known in a long time. He died about 10 years ago in Baker.

BARBARA: Yes, I understand that. Do you remember he always wore cowboy boots?

REVEREND: Yes. And I'll always remember his expression, "Thanks a million! Thanks a million!" You remember that?

BARBARA: Yes.

REVEREND: So he'd say, "Thanks a million!" Yes. And I remember another time Bishop ... was down here for some sort of a visitation, and I was out in front of the St. Andrews Church and I was just in my old dungarees fixing a tree. And he came along and spoke so nice to me; he thought I was the janitor. He didn't know I was the Episcopal minister. ...

BARBARA: We were sort of wondering, of course, you know, how you felt when you heard that the church had burned. Because it was one of the oldest ---

REVEREND: That was too bad, that was a shame, golly. It's hard to express your distress when you lose something like that. I don't know all the circumstances, but I understand that the, from what I heard, it had gotten going pretty well before the alarm was sent in. The whole thing was burnt down in the middle of the night. We were in Baker at that time. You see I went from Burns in '60 to Baker, and I was in Baker 7 years, and then with this asthma condition I finally retired at 65 instead of 68. And we were just --- I think that fire was in February '67.

BARBARA: Yes, I believe it was.

REVEREND: Yeah. Well, when we retired from Baker, they put on a party there, and I think it was Bishop ... came over. I thought it was funny, 250 people showing up for an annual meeting. And the Signor got up and said, "Suspending the annual meeting," I thought ... and then they had this party, and they pulled out a check for \$3500. And they said, "Here, we want you to go out to see your daughter." So, we were just about to start on that round the world trip, and heard about the fire in Burns. I ... some long introduction. Louis Boren was the pastor here then. That was a shame.

Not only that, they lost all the buildings, but the parish records burned up with that. I hate to say this personally, but we had just had the records micro-filmed up to the time I left in 1960. They haven't had them micro-filmed since then, so they've got the parish records in microfilm up in



my office in historiographer in Cove.

BARBARA: Oh, they do?

REVEREND: So, all the records for Burns, I saw some the other day when I was looking up something, up to 1960 are there. But the parish records since 1960 were burned up in that fire.

BARBARA: So, if anyone wants to find out anything, they have to

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REVEREND: Yeah. I'm the historiographer from the Diocese and there's all the records. But, see the itinerant services here up to about 1927, when Charlotte Brown came, then she had lay services.

Bishop ... used to come every so often for sacramental services. And then of course when ... came as the first resident priest 50 years ago. Then when things went along more or less regularly from there. But back in 1929 there was Charlotte Brown, and ... was just the Arch Deacon, the Bishop. So that --- I think that they're pretty permanent records up from about 1927 to 1960. But it is too bad they lost those things in that fire.

BARBARA: Oh, yes.

REVEREND: Now Burns was a place for transients, they come all the time, worthy and unworthy. You've got five highways here in all directions. And I can remember shortly after I was here and talking with some of the other ministers how we would deal with transients, and try to help out in emergencies. And out back of the church I used to have a big woodpile. And if a person came for help, my usual thing if they looked able bodied, I'd say, "Well, now a half hour on the woodpile and a dollar or two to help you for something to eat." And this was a Sunday morning, and a fellow came and wanted some help. It was just between services, so I said, "Alright half an hour on the woodpile and I'll give you a couple dollars for something to eat, or gasoline." And he said, "Parson don't you know it is Sunday?" I said, "Yes, I know its Sunday, and the woodpile is still there." Well, he said, "I don't work on Sundays." Well, I said, "I don't give out food on Sundays unless you work." (Laughter) We used to have that with transients.

And another thing that may be of interest to you, and we always had a great sense of support

here for the church summer school up there in Cove. And I drove a small Plymouth car at that time, and I wanted to get a larger car to take young people up to the summer school. So, I went over to Bend and bought a Volkswagen microbus. And I've taken as many as nine young people in that microbus up to the Cove summer school, with all their duds on top. And one summer, I don't mean to be prideful, but there was more young people from St. Andrews Church at the summer school than any other parish in the Diocese. But anyway, that was just a local thing ... go.

BARBARA: Well, we're running out of time, and I do thank you very much.

REVEREND: Well, it is grand to be back here for this 50th anniversary.

BARBARA: Thank you again.

REVEREND: You bet.

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