

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #96 - Side A

Subject: William Jennings

Place: Hines, Oregon

Date: October 14, 1981

Interviewer: Pauline Braymen

PAULINE BRAYMEN: This is Pauline Braymen, I'm talking with William Jennings at his home in Hines, Oregon on October the 14th, 1981. Mr. Jennings, you came to Harney County in about 1929?

WILLIAM JENNINGS: Yes, the latter part of 1929. It was either late summer or early fall; I recollect that.

PAULINE: And you came to work at the Edward Hines plant?

WILLIAM: No, it was during the construction period, and I came here with Chicago Bridge and Iron Works. It erected water towers. One down at the mill, and the other one at Hines. After that --- these of course were outside contractors. When they left here, why I went with them. But --- put up a tank in Oakland, California for Padco Paint. Then later we went up to Marysville, Washington, which is a small little town out of Seattle a ways. Put up one there and then came back to Rock Island Dam. And it seemed like I run out of work. Things were difficult and they didn't have any jobs either, and the thought occurred to me, you know, about now I'll bet they're running that sawmill, and I'll bet if I went down there I just might find a job. Sure enough. That's how I happened to come to Hines.

PAULINE: And you went to work in the shipping department then, or did you do something else first?

WILLIAM: The first thing I did was work on outside construction. There were little jobs,

light towers, this type of thing and I worked there for a while. And then yes, I went in the shipping department. Worked for a man named George Butler. I know a lot of people around here that recall him, and men that have worked for him. A lot of fellows my age because after all, its been a long time, but there are some still here, I think, who worked for George, or at least know him or recognize his name.

Yes, and I worked there then for --- well my gosh, I didn't never work any place other than in finished lumber --- from that point on, but I worked there until I retired.

PAULINE: When did you retire?

WILLIAM: I've been retired seven years now. So '81?

PAULINE: Be about 1974?

WILLIAM: Sounds right, yeah.

PAULINE: Okay. My arithmetic is a little rusty from time to time.

WILLIAM: I think that's about right. I don't recall things too vividly anymore. But uh ---

PAULINE: Were you married when you came to Harney County?

WILLIAM: No. No, I was a foot loose rascal and you had to move from job to job. And I was here for, oh gee, I don't know how long, but I got married here. I had two children.

PAULINE: What is your wife's name?

WILLIAM: Viola.

PAULINE: Viola.

WILLIAM: Her maiden name was Viola Pease and that's an old time Harney County family. She was born up town here. They had a homestead out at Dog Mountain.

PAULINE: I recognize that name, but I didn't realize that Viola was related. Someone I interviewed was --- that name has come up. I can't remember who it was. Would it be --- is she related to one of the Bakers?

WILLIAM: Yes.

PAULINE: Is her sister married to one of the Bakers?

WILLIAM: Yes. Her sister, Esther, was married to a Baker. Now what in the world was his name? A crippled fellow.

PAULINE: I think it was Walter; I'm not sure. I interviewed him and I --- Walter or Wallace, I interviewed ---

WILLIAM: Wallace.

PAULINE: Wallace. Okay, he plays the violin, plays the fiddle.

WILLIAM: Yeah.

PAULINE: I interviewed both of them.

WILLIAM: Well his wife is Vi's sister. And well gee, I don't know; I suppose you know more about that family's history than I do.

PAULINE: I knew that I had done some visiting about that family.

WILLIAM: Yeah, well we were married here in, my gosh, now when was that. I wish Mother was home. She recalls these things.

PAULINE: Well can you remember what the country was like, or what Burns and Hines area was like? I understand that there was quite a lot of sagebrush around here, where now you have green lawns and trees. What did it look like out here?

WILLIAM: Oh, gee whiz. It was all torn up and it was --- you can visualize what it was like. They were pouring another foundation every day. They had crews --- one of them running around putting in windows, another one roofs, and one thing or another, and this type of thing. It really seems to me looking back, as I recollect, it really moved along pretty darn fast. But then down at the mill, all of the vast acres, miles of ditches and this sort of thing, and it was all mangled as I recollected. And there was a lot of employment. And very, very difficult to find a place to live here during that period. The pay wasn't all that great, but there was work.

PAULINE: You made the comment the other day when I talked to you on the phone that you worked for a long time before you earned a dollar an hour.

WILLIAM: Oh, I'm sure of that. Yeah, yeah, a long time. Because if I recollect right, it was 38 or 40 cents an hour was the going wage. And yes, Mother and I, we celebrated when I got a dollar an hour. But we weren't paying --- it wasn't costing us a whole lot to live. It was costing us all we could get, but we were living. And we had us two children. Seems like we managed just fine. I've no regrets. I think it was great. It wasn't all that great, but at this stage, I think it's great.

PAULINE: Was this a company house that you bought?

WILLIAM: Uh huh, yeah. This is a --- well when Mother and I first married we lived in a little cabin up town. It was originally Jim Fellow's property. It was across from the state house there now. I think Nyleen's are the present owners. But they were little bitty cabins. I do remember this. We had the best one they had there too, because, I suppose because it was the only one that was empty. But at that we paid \$25 a month.

Then, one thing that's kind of hard for me to pass over though is the Welcome Hotel was over there on the corner by the, opposite of Copeland is now, the old ---

PAULINE: It was where what is known as Farley's Market now.

WILLIAM: Yeah. It was a lovely old hotel. And I remember we had our wedding breakfast over there, and invited what friends we could afford. And Culver Page was cooking there. I never had such a breakfast before or since.

PAULINE: What was on the menu?

WILLIAM: Well we fed them oysters. They had wine and oysters, and I don't know what all you would have for ---

PAULINE: That sounds really exotic for probably sometime in the late '30's, in the middle of the High Desert.

WILLIAM: Yeah. And I remember, and what I really remember, with-out any mistake in it at all, is it was 75 cents a plate, 75 cents a plate! Now that's hard to imagine, isn't it?

PAULINE: That's difficult today to believe.

WILLIAM: Yeah, I wish Mother were here, but that's right. And then we moved out here, and moved into this very house. The situation then was that, Pauline, if they had some work now, times were getting tough, they were darn tough too. The mill was just starting, and somebody's plans went awry I guess because there wasn't all that much demand. Well it was a depression area. And there wasn't all that demand for lumber. But the sheds were full and the shipping was --- They would allow us, let us work when they had some orders to fill. Sometimes we would work until noon; sometimes we'd work maybe ten hours the same day. Of course over-time was, I don't recall, I think it was unheard of. You worked until the sent you home.

PAULINE: If you worked you got paid, and if you didn't work you didn't get paid.

WILLIAM: Yeah, but come payday, well, if you worked any time during that day you had to pay a dollar a day rent. If you didn't work, you didn't pay nothing.

PAULINE: That allowed a lot of people a break that would keep them going, wouldn't it?

WILLIAM: Sure. We would get our wood, our electricity was hardly anything, maybe a \$1.50 a month, I don't know. But fuel and electricity --- I don't remember anybody paying for any water in these times. But everybody was pretty great. And then, oh they even had a community garden. Because my stepfather used to insist I go down there and help. But that park area there, right across from the post office and grocery store; that was all a community garden. We were allotted even in that time, you know. My stepfather, he raised a lot of, of course I helped him much, but not as much as he would have wished.

PAULINE: Now who was that?

WILLIAM: His name was William Kanning. Yeah, and they later left here. Well he stayed

here until he went to Portland and worked in the shipyards after he left here. He's buried down in Oregon City. And then in later years, oh things got progressively better and better, to my way of thinking, until you're right where you are at now, and I guess you couldn't call that better.

PAULINE: Well there's a lot of parallels to those, the early 1930's when they were struggling to get started out here, and today when they are really in the process of starting over again.

WILLIAM: I think it was more wide spread then, Pauline, than it is now. Because the county was involved, they were issuing warrants and you'd have to take a big discount to get any money out of them. The teachers were paid with warrants, because I knew one of them. And grocery stores, well it seemed like they always done the best they could, but there wasn't far they could go either. There wasn't too many places, I think the best help, place you had to go for help was to go to your neighbors. The county, I don't recollect that they was helping anybody.

PAULINE: No welfare, no unemployment.

WILLIAM: There was no welfare, there was no help, there was no poorhouse, there wasn't nothing. Just root hog or die was the word. Well yeah, they was difficult but people were --- shoot, if some-body had some meat or some flour --- sure there was a lot of poaching going on, there's no denying that. But like I say, it was root hog or die. But, oh I don't know, I don't think the parallel exists like it did. There's too many props.

PAULINE: Well yeah, I'll have to agree with you. It's difficult, I think, for anyone that didn't experience those days to realize just how tough it really was.

WILLIAM: It was tough. Now what in the world --- I think a doctor's call was, I don't know, I think a \$1.50, \$2.00. I don't know what a hospital stay was, but I know when the children were born we paid it off a little bit at a payday. But it don't seem to me like it was very

much. But compared to now, well, wages weren't very much either. So I suppose the parallel is there.

PAULINE: It's just relative.

WILLIAM: Yeah, yeah.

PAULINE: Well you said you helped install these water towers out here. How do you go about installing one of those? To me, I look at them and there is that big tank up there on those big tower legs, and the idea of putting that up without a lot of mechanical equipment sort of boggles my mind.

WILLIAM: They had the equipment too. You see they had engineers, they had a hoisting engineer, and they had the machinery. You hoisted up one piece at a time and riveted it together. And actually once you got the thing under way it didn't take very long, about five weeks for five men to put up one of those things. But it all come, it broke down and you'd take it on the ground and assemble it one piece at a time. Just like an erector set. It's not difficult. Rather dangerous.

PAULINE: Hi.

VIOLA JENNINGS: How are you?

PAULINE: Fine, how are you today? Been out to do your shopping?

VIOLA: Okay. Oh, a little of everything.

WILLIAM: There you are, Mother. We've been reminiscing, I've been telling tales on you.

VIOLA: Oh, not on me. That's your problem that was down at the mill, not mine.

WILLIAM: Oh, we went clear to Dog Mountain.

VIOLA: Oh, yeah?

PAULINE: I visited with your sister, Esther, at one time when she and, was it Wallace that she was married to?

VIOLA: Yeah, she was.

PAULINE: And so I have her and Wallace on tape, an interview I did several years ago, and we talked about the Pease family. So when he said your name I said, "Oh, that's very familiar."

WILLIAM: What year did we get married, Mother?

VIOLA: Oh ho, ho, ho. In 1933 or '34. Which was it, '30? One of those years.

WILLIAM: I don't know.

PAULINE: That's close enough.

VIOLA: It was one of those years. I don't remember exactly. I'd have to look it up.

PAULINE: Well there's --- what do you remember about the old hotel over here?

WILLIAM: Well gee. It came right along with the rest of the buildings here, as near as I recollect. It might have been a little bit behind the houses and the city construction itself, but not very darn far. And I just shudder to think how nearly finished it was, and then to go bankrupt. The wiring was in it; the heat was in it, the plaster boards was in it, the windows were in it. It looked like it was just about ready to --- you could move into it. Then they started hauling stuff off. First was the big boiler downstairs, because it was --- I don't know whether it was going to be coal fired or oil fired or what, but they --- and then let's be honest. Everybody in town, if there was anything over there they could use; they went and got it. The gypsies lived in it. It's looking good to me now. Have you been over there?

PAULINE: I watch every time I go by to see a little more progress all the time.

WILLIAM: The man that has it, he finished an apartment in the basement. My god is that beautiful. You wouldn't know you were in that old building. You bet.

PAULINE: I'm going to have to go over and visit. He's invited me to come over and visit sometime.

WILLIAM: Then he's got one finished upstairs. He has that rented. But he isn't going no

ways but up. And this is great. This is great. And this thing, this thing is temporary; it'll turn around. If people don't starve to death first.

PAULINE: Well that's --- people really have a great sense of survival, and if one-way won't work, they'll figure out some other way.

WILLIAM: Oh, it'll work. Yeah.

PAULINE: Do you remember much about the organization of the union at the mill?

WILLIAM: Not a great deal. The original one I think was the 4-L; they called it Loyal Legion of Logger Lumberman. And that was a union that was an organization. But it was kind of harmless. But I think they were kind of helpful too. But then the employees, they had a place to go, but I never heard about any grievances, or contract disputes or nothing at this time because it was rather immature I suppose. But it served a purpose, and that I think was the beginning of the Union in Harney County. Because prior to that I'm sure that there wasn't any. The Loyal Legion of Logger and Lumbermen.

PAULINE: That has a nice ring to it.

WILLIAM: Yeah! But many years ago they had the Credit Union. Its been in business my gosh, I don't know how long. But fellows down at the mill, Capps started it, I think. He run it for years out of his hip pocket. He never had no office or nothing. But that was the start of the Credit Union. Yeah, I think that I joined that before --- Well, for years you'd have to run him down if you wanted to borrow some money. He'd give you a check if you had a good co-signer. And that's the way it worked. There wasn't no overhead.

PAULINE: Then things get complicated.

WILLIAM: They get out of proportion. Hell, that was just great. And the first fire department they had was a broken down old logging truck that they brought down from Seneca, piled some hose on it, that was the fire department. I don't know but what it was about as good as --- What the hell are you going to do, you just going to get some water

on the fire. They done that pretty well in the old days. Up until oh, probably 8 or 10 years ago they never had no police department either, you know. And I don't know but what that wasn't just about as well. The City Hall used to, there wasn't any city hall, they had a room in the schoolhouse. Well hell C. J. was mayor for a long time. Everything was little, you know. But it seemed like it worked just about as well, and it sure didn't cost much.

PAULINE: Yeah, the paper work really is expensive.

WILLIAM: It sure didn't cost much. Well I don't know, these houses you could buy them for about \$1,500, and now then I think everything is relative, I guess you couldn't buy one for much less than \$50,000 or in that area. So I guess everything is relative. Whether it's any better or not, this I question. Because we sure as hell didn't have the regulation we got now.

PAULINE: Well, that's true too.

WILLIAM: Yeah, and I think we could do without it. Yep. Oh, I have mixed feelings about where some of our money goes.

PAULINE: Well I think we all do.

WILLIAM: But it isn't going to bother me now, Pauline, any more, I'll tell you that much longer. And I've had a good life, and I surely don't have no regrets, and I'd do it all over again. Yeah.

PAULINE: Well that's a good way to feel at this stage of the game. It makes for a happy retirement; you can really enjoy your beautiful home.

WILLIAM: I made a serious mistake when I first retired. I had the funny notion I'd like to, I'd be the mayor. So I got to be mayor.

PAULINE: That's right. You were mayor for a while, weren't you?

WILLIAM: I hated it worse than any job I ever had in my life before. Oh god, a frustrating thing. You shouldn't scold some of them ... They don't get paid nothing all they get is a

lot of backlash. That's a thankless job, I'll tell you.

PAULINE: It is a thankless job.

WILLIAM: Boy, and it's kind of sad too, because you can't get a good person to take it because you couldn't afford to. If somebody gets it just because they want it, like in my case, that ain't no good, no.

PAULINE: What about during World War II. You were working in the shipping department, and I understand you had quite a few women working in the shipping department at that time.

WILLIAM: Yeah, yeah they did have. But I'm trying to think what happened to them after that. Surely they didn't just terminate them and put the men back to work, did they?

PAULINE: Well I think Eunice Gregg and Mrs. Ellswick continued to work out there. My grandmother was one who worked out there, but she chose to quit after the war was over.

WILLIAM: I don't think that they terminated any, but yes, there was a lot of them there during the war, this is right. But I never thought about it much until you asked. I would suppose just natural attrition and as one of them left, they got a man in her place, or something. I would say that's probably --- there wasn't any in the planning mill because it was kind of a specialized dangerous area. But in the shipping itself, yes, there was, you bet. But I doubt that there was many working for the company, I mean on the payroll during the war years, as there was before the shutdown.

PAULINE: Yeah, there were a lot of women ---

WILLIAM: There was a lot of them there.

PAULINE: The factory especially, I understand, was a place where women worked.

WILLIAM: Yeah, they broke the factory.

PAULINE: You will have to qualify that statement, or you have to explain that statement.

WILLIAM: I was looking right at you.

PAULINE: Yeah.

WILLIAM: No, I don't know, I'm just kidding about that. You can strike that out. No, but in later years it was a better place to work. In the old days, my god it was cold. Holy smokes! You know there was damn few places to get warm either. And you'd go to work --- I don't know how many years we lived here, Pauline, but I walked to work everyday, came home for lunch everyday, snow, rain, cold. You bet, everything wasn't all sunshine and roses back ---

PAULINE: Harney County weather is, Harney County weather.

WILLIAM: You bet. And you only had an hour and you had to walk that far, and get your lunch, and be right back there before the whistle blowed. You're damn right.

There was very few cars in town, and you couldn't hardly afford to run them. I get into the damndest arguments now. I guess you shouldn't quote me, but --- Well we was getting about 40 cents an hour, and we was buying gas for 26 cents a gallon. Now I want to know from you if everything is relative, why in the hell isn't gas about \$6.50 a gallon now?

PAULINE: Now we figure wages about \$8 an hour now?

WILLIAM: Yeah.

PAULINE: And gas is what, \$1.50?

WILLIAM: Well a \$1.30. Well it don't make no difference, look at that spread.

PAULINE: Yeah, that 20 cents doesn't make that much difference.

WILLIAM: No.

PAULINE: No, you're right. And the same thing with food prices. If you're making 46 cents an hour, and were paying 5 cents a loaf for bread --- I understand that's, or maybe -- - I don't know, it was a quarter when I was a kid, I remember. But that would have been in the later '40's when I remember the price of bread was a quarter.

WILLIAM: Well I come back to gasoline and shoes. Now it used to be that a good pair of men's shoes, you'd get a good pair of shoes, you know, dress shoes, comfortable shoes, you could get a good pair of shoes for \$5. Now then, that's pretty equal. Cause you've got to pay about \$75 or \$80 for a good pair of shoes. Now this is all right. But you can't relate it to gasoline, and you can't relate it to potatoes or wheat.

PAULINE: Well I think this is a good comment to have on the tape. People don't, you know, people my age and people younger than myself don't have that perspective that you have, of seeing that really low wage and what prices have done. I think it's a very valid comment.

WILLIAM: Something has happened to our ---

PAULINE: Our priorities I think --- Well, our standard of living is quote "higher". We expect to have a television set, and we expect to have a record player, and we expect to turn the lights on and have electricity, and the house warm day and night.

WILLIAM: Yep. Well, we expect to have a plumber if you need one, and you expect him to come right now, and an electrician. It was unheard of. By god if your sewer went haywire, you fixed it. If your lights went out, you found out what was the matter. It wasn't regulated. Now I could get thrown in jail for going and trying to fix my own lights.

PAULINE: Well, I know.

WILLIAM: Yeah. I don't know.

PAULINE: What do they call that, self-reliance?

WILLIAM: Well it was just by virtue of having to do something. Well you learned to do it and you did it. Go right back to root hog or die. You didn't ask nobody nothing. You had to do it. If you had a big chuckhole in the road --- In later years we got wealthy, I got a bicycle, running down the road to beat hell, went end over end. We had to fill the chuckholes.

PAULINE: You didn't call the city road department.

WILLIAM: You didn't call the city, that's right. Oh, I don't know, we could talk here for a month at it. Just millions and millions of little things that --- there wasn't any money spent for alcohol. On a good payday or holiday you'd get a little bootleg whiskey or something, but that was it. Oh, quite a few people around town made home brew. But they made it to give away. It didn't cost nothing because, but --- No, no.

Mother and I, and Sally was with us, and we stopped out there at that Warm Springs area. We were going down to Winnemucca a while back, you know. I can't figure out what's the matter there. My god, that water is hot.

PAULINE: It seems like they would do something with that water at some point in time.

WILLIAM: One time, you know, there was a dance hall and a ---

PAULINE: Kind of a resort type place.

WILLIAM: Yeah, and I thought it was a going concern.

PAULINE: I guess it burned down and they just didn't build back.

WILLIAM: Must not have been a paying proposition.

PAULINE: Must not have been too good.

WILLIAM: But it's hard to understand why it would be there for all this time.

PAULINE: At this point in time, too, it looks like someone would be ---

WILLIAM: Natural heat.

PAULINE: --- putting greenhouses up there to beat the band. Yeah, I've thought about that too. Because that water is terribly hot.

WILLIAM: It's probably not feasible. I assume maybe they're asking so much for the property that it probably just wouldn't be feasible.

PAULINE: Well our transportation costs, I think, too, in and out of this area kill a lot of good ideas.

WILLIAM: I've got one thing here that I'm going to show you that might be of interest to you. I don't know what else you want from me.

PAULINE: Okay. What have you got here?

WILLIAM: The thought occurred to me you might want to browse through some of that.

PAULINE: Oh, this is from the very ---

(END OF TAPE)

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