

The Life Story of Joseph Arthur Williams

Joseph Arthur Williams, known as “Joe” was born on January 13, 1861 in Lost Valley, Lane County, Oregon, the son of Elias Pitzer Williams and Almira A. Russell. His mother called him little “Josie.” He was to have only one brother, Robert Elias Williams, and then nine half-brothers and –sisters.

His mother, Almira, died of smallpox when he was only five. His father married again when Joe was seven, and their stepmother, Gertrude Williams then raised him and his brother. She soon had many little ones herself to care for and not much time for the two older brothers.

Joe attended school at Dexter or Pleasant Hill through the eighth grade, and helped to take care of the little ones while he lived at home. Joe had a lot of family in Lost Valley and around Lane County. His mother, Almira, was from a family of sixteen children, and his grandfather, Thomas Williams lived close by and many of the extended Williams family. However, Joe left home and struck out on his own for Eastern Oregon when he was fifteen, in 1876, and found work as a buckaroo there working for a salary.

Many of his family members were around the Eastern Oregon area during this time, in Harney, Grant, and Lake counties. Joe came back to Lane County looking for a wife. Ten years later he married Ella S. Roney, in 1888, in Eugene, Lane County when he was twenty-seven and Ella, thirty-two. Ella’s mother was a sister to Joe’s grandmother, Hannah Williams. In the next few weeks they packed up everything they needed and headed over the Cascade Mountains with horses and a covered wagon to homestead near a ranch Joe was working for in Eastern Oregon.

On the way over the mountains, Ella, who was a heavy woman, became ill and had a stroke. They returned to a doctor in Eugene, but Ella died there and was buried in the Pleasant Hill cemetery. They had only been married a little over a month. Joe then went on back to live in Eastern Oregon alone.

He continued to work for a salary as a buckaroo on the Buck Creek Ranch near Riley, Oregon and lived in the bunkhouse. Joe met Ruth Ann McConnell at her sister Martha’s ranch home on Silver Creek, near Riley, in Harney County. Ruth

was from Lane County and she was temporarily living with her sister for a while, helping out after Martha had given birth. Very soon, another wedding was planned. Joe and Ruth McConnell were married on May 9, 1891, when Joe was thirty and Ruth, thirty-three. They got married at the Burns Hotel by a Justice of the Peace, J.C. Parker. Ruth's stepmother, Mary, who was a seamstress, helped make Ruth's wedding dress by hand, and it is on display at the Harney County Museum in Burns.

Joe and Ruth moved into a homestead one-room cabin near the Buck Creek Ranch, which was close to Silver Creek and Riley. The cabin had been used by pack rats and the floor was thick with sticks, grass, and debris. They had to use a shovel to scoop the mess out onto a canvas, which was then carried out and dumped. Ruth burned sulfur in the cabin to fumigate it for bedbugs and a family of skunks that lived under the floor. After getting it cleaned up, they lived there for two or three years.

Joe had some horses, a herd of sheep, and some milk cows and calves at the cabin. For a while Joe was in the sheep business with Bob Williams (not related) as his partner. When the partnership dissolved he tried the dairy business, making butter and selling it in nearby towns. According to his daughter, Louise, "My father milked cows, and made butter from the cream and put it down in firkins. A firkin was a wooden container made of strips of wood about $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thick and bound together with iron hoops. He made them himself. One firkin held a number of pounds of butter that were not made all at once. One batch of butter was put in and tamped down solid and covered with brine. At the next churning time, the brine was poured off, more butter added then it was covered with more brine, and so on, until it was full. The brine was made of water and salt strong enough to float an egg. The butter would keep for a long time in this manner. After several firkins were filled, he took the butter to Burns or some other town, perhaps Prineville or Baker, and sold it to hotels, stores, or individuals. He always found a ready sale for his butter."

Joe was gone a good deal of the time, either tending sheep on the range or delivering butter. Some neighbor girls would take turns staying with Ruth. Ruth got pregnant while living in the homestead cabin, and towards the end of her pregnancy, Joe took her to Burns by wagon, where they rented a house from

Grandma Haskell until the baby was born. A neighboring rancher looked after their livestock while they were gone. Dr. Sam McPheeters delivered their daughter, Martha Louise, at their rented home on Dec. 10, 1893 in Burns. Joe's stepsister, Etta Williams McPheeters, was the doctor's daughter-in-law. Joe and Ruth stayed in town until spring, and then went back to the ranch with their new daughter. Martha Louise was always the apple of her daddy's eye.

A man by the name of Bill Brown lived way out at the Gap Ranch. He raised horses for the army and some men had stolen a bunch of his horses. He came and got Joe, and Joe went with him to round up the horses from the men who had stolen them. They got within sight of the group, which caused the men to ride off and leave the horses behind. When they got back with the horses, Bill Brown told Ruth, "By Jove, Ruth, I think if Joe could've caught up with 'em, he would have shot 'em all!"

In early 1896, Joe and Ruth left Silver Creek and bought a ranch south of Burns that adjoined the big Double O Ranch. It was called the Rock Island Ranch. Joe's brother, Rob Williams, joined him there and they formed a partnership. After Rob married Ollie Evans of Eugene, trouble started, however, and they finally dissolved the partnership with some hard feelings. Very sadly they had little to do with each other after that, according to his daughter, Louise.

This ranch was a wild hay ranch and took a lot of work. Joe had a hay crew and he also contracted out for hay jobs. He took the contract of putting up hay for the Double O Ranch each summer. The crew and cook camped out using a large tent, and there were around thirty in a crew. One summer, Joe's stepsister, Becky Williams Keeney, helped with the cooking as her husband had left her. Joe's stepmother, Gertrude, was there too, with her youngest son, Rodney. They all helped.

Joe still owned some sheep when they moved to the Rock Island Ranch, but decided to get rid of them and started a herd of cattle instead. He had some horses, and raised five or six hogs each year. Joe also kept a corral full of wild horses and broke them while haying. Again, they milked cows and made butter and Joe decided to build a "milk house room" onto the end of their house. He built the walls three feet thick with sandstone to keep it cool. The other part of

the house was made with wood. They kept the milk and butter there and did the churning. They always had fresh cream, butter and eggs.

On July 4, 1896, they welcomed a son, Ira McConnell Williams, who was born on the ranch. There was no doctor around so Joe went for a neighbor who was a midwife, Mrs. Clark Freeman, and she assisted in the birth. Ruth had several miscarriages over the later years, but no more babies. Joe had his little girl and Ruth had her son that carried her family name.

Joe served as Justice of the Peace for six years during that time. They lived on the Rock Island Ranch for four years and raised their family. Martha Louise later remembered, "Our place was like Grand Central Station. Travelers from all directions stopped to spend the night or longer. Father would never charge them for room or meals, not for feed for their horses. The night that Ira was born, Ruth cooked for some Jewish peddlers that had stopped. They slept in the barn and were surprised the next morning to learn that a baby had been born! Father was a good provider and we always had plenty to eat."

Joe was also a good father. Martha Louise remembers the day he spent most of a day playing with them by rolling boulders down a hillside. He sometimes took his children fishing. They cut down willow branches for poles and fitted them up with string for fishing. Joe also loved to ride horses with the kids. Someone gave the children two coyote pups. One died but the other lived to be almost grown when Joe had to shoot it. It was gentle as a dog and followed the children around, but it killed the chickens.

In the winter, they travelled by sleigh across the snowfields. Once the horses got spooked and Martha Louise got tossed from the sleigh head first into a snow bank. Only her feet were sticking straight up, enough for her dad to see and rescue her. The old timers referred to one winter there as "the hard winter." It was extra cold and snow lay on the ground until later in the spring. When spring finally came the entire valley was covered with water.

Community dances were held in the schoolhouse in Riley. Everyone went, and visited if they did not dance. The children were bedded down in covered wagons provided for that purpose. The settlers got their mail whenever someone went to Burns and collected mail for the whole community.

In 1900, Joe purchased a ranch in the Drewsey area northeast of Burns from A.T. Marks. It was called the "Valley of the Moon Ranch." Joe had 480 acres there, sixteen miles west from Drewsey. Two of his cousins, Bert and Charles Dunten, also owned ranches near Drewsey. The ranch was well improved, with a house and other outbuildings, including a smokehouse and bunkhouse, and an orchard. The house was wooden and unpainted, as were most houses in those days, and had a front and back porch. There was a side hill cellar and a "privy" or outhouse at the end of the lane. North of the house were located a barn, corrals, chicken house and shop for tools.

Joe went into the cattle and horse raising business in earnest here. His herd of cattle kept increasing and at one time Joe bought three purebred shorthorn bulls to improve the herd. He also had his herd of horses, and saw to it that a purebred stallion was shipped in. He talked several men into buying stock in the horse, but Joe took care of him most of the time.

As Martha Louise recalled, "Papa decided he needed to bring water for irrigation from some distance away in order to raise hay, grain, and alfalfa. He would have to make a ditch across some land owned by a man by the name of Moffet. He asked permission and it was granted—verbally—no papers were drawn up. After he had the ditch dug, Moffet sued him for trespassing. Papa won the lawsuit and used his ditch. The water had to be run through flumes around a hill near our ranch."

Joe made butter here also, and sold fresh butter, cream and eggs. Ruth later said that they were "well-fixed" at this time but didn't know it then. There were always about 25-30 hired men working on the ranch the year round and living in the bunkhouse, as well as the haying and threshing crews in the summer and fall.

Joe had a schoolhouse built near the center of the district on his property so Louise and Ira could attend school. Louise was eight and Ira nearly six when they started going to school. It was about a mile to the schoolhouse, so they rode an old horse called Bally. Joe usually served as the school director in charge of getting the teachers. They boarded many of the schoolteachers at their house. The teacher was paid \$50 and Ruth charged \$10 for room and board. The female teachers shared a room with Louise. The teachers usually only stayed for one or two school terms. Joe's stepsister, Ora Williams, was the teacher for a couple of

terms and boarded with Joe and Ruth. Louise grew close to her teachers, and wrote and kept in touch with many of them as long as they lived. It was said of Joe that he always manifested great zeal and interest in the advancement of educational interests. Some years when the winter was harsh, they had just six months of school—three in the spring and three in the fall.

A new family moved to the next property by the name of Mr. & Mrs. George Howe, and their five children. Ruth was pleased to learn they were Baptists. They brought their telephone with them, and they asked Joe to buy a telephone and connect the two by running a telephone wire along their fence. The phones ran on batteries. Ruth Ann could now talk to the neighbors. These were the first phones in the area.

The ranchers held community square dances in the school. Their neighbor, Mr. Howe, played the violin and Joe “called” at these square dances. The kids would fall asleep on bales of hay or on a bench at the side. One time a man got drunk and started shooting at the musician’s feet.

The family had a pet deer. They got it as a fawn, and raised it. It would follow Louise and Ira to school and look in the window at school to make sure they were settled before going back home (really!) They had the deer quite a long time, but one day it was feeding in the corral with the horses and got kicked in the head and died.

Joe again served as Justice of the Peace here, and belonged to the I.O.O.F. in Drewsey. Joe performed many weddings in their home with Ruth Ann as a witness. Once she fixed a wedding supper for a couple, but they wouldn’t stay to eat it.

One day Joe was returning from Drewsey—about sixteen miles away. He came upon a shoe, then another, and another, scattered on his way home. He figured he was behind a peddler and stopped to pick up each shoe. He never did run into the peddler, so he took the shoes home. As Louise remembers, “There was a pair of ‘old mother comforts’ that were high lace-up shoes that just fit me. I was required to wear them by my parent, but I just hated them. There was also a pretty low-cut oxford shoe that I loved, but my father only found one and I could never find the other.

Joe, Louise and Ira were all baptized about 1909 in the Malheur River near the ranch. Ruth had already been baptized growing up in Lane County. The Rev. C.W. Holloman, pastor of the Burns Baptist Church, baptized them.

In 1909 Joe decided to take his family to the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition being held in Seattle. They would have to go by wagon to the train in Ontario, and it took a week to get ready for the wagon trip, which was three days and two nights of camping out. They followed a dirt road, full of ruts and very dusty. After resting and cleaning up in a rooming house in Ontario, Joe found the horses he had left with a farmer to care for, had been used for the farmer's fall work, and were reduced to skin and bones. They purchased a winter's worth of supplies in Ontario before loading up and returning to the ranch. Most every fall, trips were made to the railroad in Ontario for supplies for the year.

When Louise finished the eighth grade, she took the county eighth grade examination and passed in 1910. Her teacher, Ernest Larson, advised her to go to high school, and Joe was eager for his children to get an education beyond eighth grade. Louise was sent to Burns where she stayed with her Aunt Martha—Ruth's sister—and her cousin Nina, and attended Harney County High School. Her only trip home (a two-day trip) that school year was at Christmas, when Joe went to get her. The family was so lonely without her that Joe decided to leave the ranch and move to Ontario so she could live at home but still attend high school. Joe went to Burns and visited Louise towards spring, and told her that he had bought some lots in Ontario. His plan was to have a home built on these lots before school started the next fall.

In 1911, Joe's stepbrother, Perry Williams from Baker, who was a carpenter, came to Ontario and became the architect and builder of a nice house in the Villa Park area of Ontario for Joe and his family. It was to be a large two-story house with nine rooms and a full basement. Joe and Ruth loaded up furniture and other belongings in a large wagon and left their ranch in August of that year. They sold the cattle and horses, and left the ranch in the care of Paris and Ora Fraley, Joe's stepsister and her new husband. When they arrived in Ontario, they spread a tent on their property and lived in it until Perry and Joe completed a barn, then the family lived in that while the house was completed. The house had a team of carpenters working on it and it cost \$3,000 to build. They had a large, fenced

corral in the back where they kept a cow. Joe milked the cow and sold milk to the neighbors, who would return the empty glass jars with a dime in them, as it cost ten cents a quart. Joe always had milk, butter and homemade ice cream at home. There was a little apple orchard behind the house and they grew their own garden. They tried "ground cherries," small bushes with amber colored cherries. Joe kept some Rhode Island Red chickens out back and his grandchildren remember that they were big chickens and laid nice brown eggs. They moved into their new home that fall after Louise started school at the Ontario High School. Joe went back and forth to the ranch for a while, but Paris Fraley was no farmer or rancher and things did not go well, so Joe started trying to sell it. The entire family joined the First Baptist Church in Ontario by Christian experience in November of 1911, and they attended there as long as they lived.

Sometime after they moved Joe bought some mules and drove them to Washington. He caught pneumonia while there and went to the hospital, but he didn't get good care, and they gave him only beans to eat. He had left another man in charge of his mules and the man sold them and kept most of the money. Joe took the train home and used the little money he got from the mules to buy a blanket to wrap up in on the train. He was very sick but made it home where Ruth got him to the doctor and he slowly recovered. His grandson, Art Brown, remembers, "His lungs were never completely well after that. One lung continued to have an abscess, and fluid remained in that lung. A doctor performed surgery to drain this fluid and he removed part of a rib and opened a hole into the lung so it could drain and heal. However, the doctor put the opening too high so that the lower part of the lung never did drain. It became a smelly abscess and remained an oozing sore in his side the rest of his life. He wore a thick pad of gauze to catch the drainage. Grandpa was often embarrassed by the offensive odor that this caused. I never knew him any other way." (He later died from this same ailment.)

The end of the mule story was that Joe had got an old Maxwell car in the mule deal, so later he went back up to get it. As Art Brown recalls, "He drove it home but when he got there he forgot how to stop it, so he drove around the block and headed back to town and then back home again. I don't know whether he finally remembered or ran out of gas before it got stopped. That was his first car, and he never learned to be a very good driver."

Joe engaged in the mercantile business in Ontario, and bought his own store. It was called The New York General Store. He sold dry goods and groceries. They did deliveries from the store in a horse-drawn buggy. He had a partner named Reynolds, and his niece, Nina, worked at the counter. Her mother had died and she lived with Joe and Ruth in those years. One day his bookkeeper that was a Christian man told Joe that his partner was stealing from him. They dissolved the partnership then and there and Joe kept the store.

Joe eventually sold the store to Andy Robinson who added a meat market to the groceries. Joe then went to work for Andy and tested cream for him. A farmer would save the cream from his cows for a week and then bring it to the store to sell. There was equipment in the basement used to test the cream for sweetness and butterfat content. After testing, the weight, the test score, and other information with the farmers' name was recorded in a book. The farmer took the original copy to the office in the store upstairs. He was either given cash for his cream or could apply the value to groceries he bought. Joe was also the ice man and ran an ice machine. It froze one hundred pound blocks of ice in several tub-like containers. This was used for in-home iceboxes. All the years he worked at the store, he had his ailing side to put up with. After Joe's death, Andy Robinson made payments to Ruth for many years.

Once Joe was walking down the street in Ontario when he met a man who asked him for some money. Joe said, "You go over to the other side of the street, I'm working this side!" That was a family joke for years. Another time, he took the family to Boise, Idaho and purchased general admission tickets to a circus. They walked in and Joe seated his family in the "Reserved Seating" section. An employee came over and tried to collect the extra fee, but Joe only said, "Get out of my way! I came to see the show and I want to see it!" They sat in the reserved section with no additional payment and enjoyed the circus.

Things began to change after first Louise and then Ira graduated from high school. Nina was all alone after her mother died, so came to live with Joe and Ruth in 1912 and lived with them for seven years until her marriage to Charles Kelso. Louise married Will Brown in August of 1915 at her home on a Sunday afternoon, and Ira married Ethel Davis in 1917. Both Louise and Ira stayed close by Ontario, and the families remained close.

Once Joe's car was stolen and then found in Caldwell, Idaho. Louise's husband Will went to Caldwell with Joe to retrieve it. They went into a diner to eat dinner, and Joe asked to wash his hands. That was his way of getting into the back so he could check on who was cooking. If it were a Chinese cook, he would walk out as he didn't think Chinese cooks were clean enough.

Joe Williams was a tall man standing about six feet tall, and always on the thin side. He wore glasses and in his later years he had salt and pepper hair that he combed straight back. He had a quick temper, but he got over it pretty quick also. He didn't have much patience with adults that misbehaved, but he was very tolerant of children and had a tender heart. Joe and Ruth became grandparents in 1916 with the birth of their granddaughter Wilma Brown, and went on to have six grandchildren altogether. His granddaughter Wilma remembers that "he spoke loudly and it scared her." Grandson, Art Brown, recalled, "As a kid, I don't remember being afraid of him, but he was always rather stern and gruff. I think that perhaps his illness had something to do with his attitude. He and Grandma Ruth quarreled a lot. At least, they barked at one another quite a bit as they talked. I'm sure they loved each other, but their life together was far from smooth. Grandpa was always good to his grandchildren though. I don't remember ever being scolded by him." Joe enjoyed his grandchildren in these years. He was a dignified looking man in his years in Ontario, having given up his ranching clothes for business and dress clothes. His granddaughter Bethel Asmussen remembers "Grandpa Williams had several cars when he was older, but he was a bad driver. He had an olive green Model T. Ford, a 4-door sedan with roll up windows. That was pretty fancy car for the mid-twenties."

Art Brown tells the story, "One Sunday our family in our Model T, along with Grandpa Joe and Grandma Ruth in their car, went to Caldwell to have Sunday dinner with Nina Kelso and her family. When it came time to go home, I wanted to ride with Grandpa and Grandma in the green Ford. On the way, Grandpa got too close to the edge of the road on the passenger side where I was sitting. The soft dirt pulled the car far enough off the road so that it scraped up against a rocky bank before it came to a stop. The window where I was sitting shattered but none of it cut me. I was, however, very frightened. Daddy back up and pulled the car back on the road. Grandpa asked me to ride the rest of the way home with them but I refused."

Another thing his grandchildren remember about him was that he went to sleep anywhere. After a meal, he would stretch out on his floor and sleep, as Ruth wouldn't let him muss up the bed. He also went to sleep in church they remember. As he got into his late sixties, Joe's health was on the decline. His bad lung would hemorrhage once in a while which would leave him weak for a few days. He could no longer work at the store, but continued to milk a cow and a nanny goat every day. Joe developed pneumonia the winter on 1932 as a result of his lung abscess. The doctor tried again to drain it, however he got a further lung infection. His grandson, Art Brown, tells the story of Joe's death. "One afternoon when I was a sophomore, Uncle Ira came to school to see me. He said that Grandpa's lung had hemorrhaged badly and that he was pretty weak so was confined to bed. Uncle Ira also told me that he got permission from my parents for me to spend the night with Grandpa and Grandma, and that I was to do the milking, feeding the animals, and other chores. When I got to their house after school, I remember standing by Grandpa's bed and looking at him. He was very pale, kept his eyes closed, and never responded. I could tell that Grandma was pretty worried. Grandma fed me supper, and I went to the barn to do the chores. When I was finished, I was standing by Grandpa's bed again. As I stood there, his breathing changed, and was coming sporadically, in gasps. I called for Grandma, and she rushed to my side. We stood together for a bit and she told me to run to Dr. Weise's house next door and get him quickly. This was all so frightening that I hesitated, so Grandma rushed after him herself. Dr. Weise came immediately, kneeled by Grandpa's side, and watched him gasp for the last time. He listened for a heartbeat and there was none. He looked up at Grandma and said, "Ruth, Joe is gone." Joe Williams died on February 23, 1933 at the age of 72. Ruth Ann died several years later on March 12, 1949 at age 90. They are both buried in the Evergreen cemetery in Ontario, Oregon.

The story of Joseph Williams and his family spans the turning of the 20th century in America. His life reflects the cultural changes during that time: from rural homesteading, clearing land and raising herds and crops, to industrializing, moving into towns and cities, and making a more urban and affluent way of life. Joe Williams and his story is the story of our country and the changes reflected in the lives of its citizens.