

# GERDA BROWNTON

Union County resident for 64 years

## AN ORAL HISTORY



Interviews in February and July, 2003  
at her home and at Eastern Oregon University  
in La Grande OR

Interviewers: Vanessa Clemens and members of an EOU class

**UNION COUNTY, OREGON HISTORY PROJECT**

Affiliate of the Oregon Historical Society

2004  
(revised from 2003)

# **UNION COUNTY, OREGON HISTORY PROJECT**

An Affiliate of the Oregon Historical Society

A non-profit, tax-exempt corporation formed in 2002

In collaboration with Eastern Oregon University  
Cove Improvement Club History Committee  
Elgin Museum & Historical Society  
Union Museum Society

## **Purposes**

To record & publish oral histories of long-time Union County residents  
&  
To create a community encyclopedia

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For a list of people whose interviews are available as edited transcripts,  
call 541-975-1694

or

write P.O. Box 2841, La Grande OR 97850

or

e-mail [unionhistproj@eoni.com](mailto:unionhistproj@eoni.com)

copies of transcripts are \$4.00 each + shipping & handling

## **Preface**

Much of the history of a place is stored in the memories of people who have lived there. Their stories may be told to family members, but, unless someone makes a special effort to record these stories, they become lost to future generations.

Each of the historical societies in Union County, Oregon has begun to make that effort. Tape recordings exist in several locations, some of them transcribed in written form, others not. A more ambitious and thorough effort seemed necessary so that more of the oral history of Union County could be captured and preserved.

The Union County, Oregon History Project, begun in 2002, is making that more ambitious effort. One of its principal purposes is to collect as many oral histories of older Union County residents as possible and to make them available in both taped and written form. This edited transcript is part of the series of oral histories to be produced by that project.



### **About the Interviews and This Edited Version**

The interviews with Gerda Brownnton took place at her home and in a classroom at Eastern Oregon University in La Grande. On the latter occasion, Gerda was invited by Robert Davis, Associate Professor of English, and Doug Kaigler, Associate Professor of Art, to be interviewed by a class whose focus was the Hen Party. This group of Union County women made annual trips by horse into the Wallowa Mountains. (An edited version of their interview has been published separately by EOU.) At age 84, Gerda is lively and involved in community affairs; one of these activities is service on the Board of Representatives for the Union County, Oregon History Project

The first interviewer was Vanessa Clemens, a volunteer with the Union County, Oregon History Project. She completed a one-hour interview on February 13, 2003; other interviewers were students in the EOU course--Dawn Blincoe, Ron Blincoe, Jasen Hansen, Kelly Smutz, and Risa Tanzawa--as well as Professors Davis and Kaigler on July 25, 2003.

Heather Pilling's full transcription (available for research purposes) presents the literal contents of the interview. The edited version presented here differs from the literal transcription in the following characteristics;

- reorganization of content
- deletion of some extraneous comments
- omission of false sentence starts and other normal speech fillers that detract from readability
- normalization of pronunciation and grammar in conformity with standards of written English.

*GB* designates Gerda Brownnton's words, *I* the interviewers'.



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## Growing Up Outside Union County

I: Please tell me about your birth--when and where--your parents, and your maiden name.

GB: I was born on January 27, 1919 in Worcester, Massachusetts. My maiden name is Cornell. My father's name was Lynnwood Brownell Cornell; he was a native of New England who ventured out into the wild West and met the woman who became his wife and my mother--Eleanor Menape. After they had a baby in Portland (my older sister), he decided he could probably make more money if he went east. So I was born in Worcester during a bad winter. Only the streetcar tracks were cleared; he had to drive along the streetcar tracks in order to get to the hospital. I was born with yellow jaundice, so when my mother saw me, I was covered with blood and had yellow skin. She kind of wanted to reject me, but she couldn't, so there we were.

By the time I was two years old, we were back in Portland. That's where I was raised. My sister and I were the only children until about ten years later, when a couple of boys came along. She had been told she wouldn't have any more children, so these two boys were fine.

I: Are your brothers and sister still alive?

GB: No. My sister and one brother have died. I have one brother in Portland, and we cherish each other because we are all that's left of the Cornell family. No Cornell has had boy children, so that name isn't going to be carried on.

The Cornells were a wonderful New England family, who, incidentally, started a meat packing plant which eventually became the Armour Company. It was a big deal but many years ago; we've forgotten all about that now.

I: Do you remember visits to your grandparents?

GB: Yes. The parents on my father's side died very early, when he was about 16. He struggled on his own--going to Pennsylvania University, graduating, and then going into the plumbing business. He came west to form a plumbing company.

My mother's parents lived on 102<sup>nd</sup> and Glisan in Portland. When we visited them, I thought we were going way out into farm land, which it really was, because there weren't too many houses around. She taught me how



Gerda (l.) with her parents and sister, Cynthia, ca 1921

Photo courtesy of Gerda Brownton

to make bread and how to cook. My sister wasn't domestically inclined, so I did a lot of cooking.

I: Did she have wood stove?

GB: She had both a wood stove and an electric stove; she also had a fireless cooker--a big box with a big piece of ceramic or a similar material that goes in the bottom. You heat this circle of ceramic on your wood stove and then put it in the bottom. Four pans containing food fit in there, allowing you to cook a whole meal. It was an interesting way to cook--like slow cooking in today's crock pot but without electricity. All it needed was those heated ceramic things. With "progress," that disappeared.

I: Was there religion in your home?



Gerda doing a handstand (in her self-acknowledged tomboy mode), her father watching, ca. 1929

Photo courtesy of Gerda Brownton

GB: Central Presbyterian Church up Ankeny Street about five blocks from my home. I got a wonderful Christian education there, because the teachers insisted that we visit black churches and that members of the black churches visit us. That was a pretty big idea in those days. So it was fun. We learned a lot.

I: Your school days were in Portland?

GB: I went to Laurelhurst elementary school and can still remember the teachers I had. They were outstanding, the gym teacher especially. Being athletic, I would remember the gym teacher. Another of my favorite teachers was Sue Burg; I corresponded with her for many years after I left the school

Then I went to Washington High School. High school was a wonderful time of my life. They had dances at noon. It was a small campus, with not a lot to do; we couldn't go home for lunch, so we stayed there. The dances kept us on campus. I was in the drama club, which was called Masque. It was a terrific, though I was too chubby to be the star. My older sister was blond, thin, and beautiful, so she always had more boyfriends than she knew what to do with. She'd ask me to sit and talk with one while she went out with the other. I always thought that was a kick.

Somewhere along the line, while we were still in high school, we had to move out to 102nd and Glisan because my grandmother died. We moved out there to stay with my grandfather. I

remember picking blackberries to sell to Safeway so that I could have a pair of English riding boots. We had chickens, a drying yard, and a hot house. It was a wonderful piece of property. We loved it. My father could really express himself by painting in wonderful colors--something most people weren't doing in the '30s.

I: Art painting?

GB: No. Like the railing going upstairs that he painted three different colors --yellow, orange, and black. I loved living in my grandmother's house. It had a wonderful smell to it.

My father was Portland City Treasurer. When the Depression got really bad, they decided that all the people who worked for the city should live in the city. We had to give up that wonderful house and go back to the house on Ankeny, which had renters. So we were back in the city limits.

### **Meeting Her Future Husband**

I: How did you meet your husband?

GB: I was working at Berg's at the time-- a nice women's apparel shop. It was pretty nice because I met a lot of people and made \$60 a month, enough to feed and clothe myself and pay rent. My cousin, a doctor, used to come in and buy clothes for his wife. One day he said, "Somebody is coming into town that I want you to meet." (I'd been after him to get me a husband.) "I've invited him to dinner and I want to invite you, too, for June 22<sup>nd</sup>." I went up and met Wes Brownton.

I: What year?

GB: 1940. By the 15<sup>th</sup> of September, we were married. It was something that was meant to happen and happen fast. He had left his law practice in La Grande and gone to Salem to work at a state job just to get a little different perspective on life.

### **Marriage and the Move to La Grande**

GB: But as soon as we were married, he decided he wanted to get back to La Grande and establish a residence. And so I was liberated when I came to La Grande. When we got here, the war was getting worse. He was a reserve officer, so we knew his call-up was inevitable. That happened in Fall, 1941. Meanwhile, we bought this piece of property [where Gerda presently lives] to think about all the time we were gone. There was a big house here, a milk house, a shop, and a big barn. While we were gone, we talked about what we would do with the property.

I: You went with him when he went in the service?

GB: Yes. Everything we owned we put in a little roadster. Five years later we came back.

I: Where were you when he was in the service?

### **Military Service**

GB: We were stationed at Paine Field in Everett, Washington. He went to

several schools, and I'd go home to Portland. Our oldest child was born in Everett. Then he went to the Judge Advocate General School in Ann Arbor, Michigan during the summer--no time to be in Ann Arbor, Michigan because it's hot as Hades there. From there, he entered a general command school in Washington, D.C.; I went with him.

He ended up as a captain in the Judge Advocate General's Department and was eventually promoted to Lieutenant Colonel. Because he was over age, he had to retire when he got to the right age. His brother became a general, but there was no chance of that for Wes.

### **Return to La Grande**

GB: We came home and started building our house here in 1950. By that time we had two children--Carol, the oldest, and Sally. Alice Miller sold us a little house, which we remodeled, and a second barn; we lived in the house for



Captain Wesley Brownnton of the Judge Advocate General Department, U.S. Army, with Sally, Gerda's and Wes's second child, 1945

Photo courtesy of Gerda Brownnton

five years and then used it as a rental for several years. Isn't it fun to look back on those times because life was so simple in those days?

Wes's habit, which he started right at the beginning of our marriage, was to make out a budget for every month. In some months there was more down for gasoline for the car than there was for groceries. Groceries were cheap. We were so involved with each other that we would forget that the gas tank had to be filled once in a while, and we would run out of gas. It was such a funny thing! I'd say, "What's the matter with you, Wes?" He'd say, "What's the matter with you?"

### **Child Rearing, Further College Work, and Business**

I: Did you work or did you mostly raise your kids?

GB: I mostly raised my kids. I'm a great advocate of education, so, after the



Gerda Brownnton, ca. 1951

Photo courtesy of Gerda Brownnton

girls had graduated from college, I went back to college and got a teaching degree. There was an excess of teachers at that time, and I felt like it would be crazy for me to get a job. By that time I had Mark and Cindy; I might as well stay home and take care of them. I did a little substituting, and both of our mothers needed attention and transportation. Both my mother and his lived here. (Wes and his mother, dad, brother, and sister came to La Grande in 1912 from Canyon City OR.)

I'm trying to think how things were way back then, but, with every advancement that we make, we forget how primitive we were the time before. In those days, for example, even when we bought this piece of property, every street around here was graveled. Also, almost everybody had a cow. My husband, a lawyer, milked a cow for twenty years, and the college professors milked cows. It was the common thing.

A few years before Wes became a judge, a paint store became available as an investment, so we decided that we would buy it. It was on Adams Avenue in the middle of the block between Elm and Fir. There had been a bakery there. It was called Town and Country Paint and Glass Store. This was a store that Mrs. Nora Bradley had already been working in; we kept her working there because she was a great person. We decided to keep the paint store and initiate a framing department and a gift shop. Wes and I had a lot of fun going to the markets and buying for it.

But when he became judge, he couldn't give it his attention, and that was the year that Cindy was born, so I couldn't give it my attention. We sold it to Rhodes Lewis, the music teacher at the college at the time; he sold musical instruments from there.

### **Wesley Brownton, Union County Circuit Judge**

I: When did Wes become a judge?

GB: He was 48 years old when he was sworn in in January, 1957.

I: For how many years was he a judge?

GB: He was judge for eighteen years and then did senior judging for about ten years.

I: What does that mean?



Wesley Brownton, ca. 1940  
Photo courtesy of Gerda Brownton

GB: There's a provision in the state judgeship that, once you retire and want to stay active, your name goes on a list; if a judge is needed someplace, they send for you. He got to judge in Roseburg, Klamath Falls, and especially Multnomah County.

I: Did you get to travel with him?

GB: Once in a while I did, but something usually kept me busy. We didn't go away and leave the properties because we had horses, other animals, and people to care for.

### **Participation in Union County Organizations**

I: I know that you have always been busy in the community. Talk about some of your civic and political activities.

GB: One thing about being a judge is that you sign a statement that you are non-partisan. That is a good thing with a judge, who must look at both sides equally. As far as I was concerned, I knew that I had better not define myself as either Republican or Democrat. We could not stand up publicly for whatever we believed. We never could give a contribution to anything that had any political aspects to it. So the non-partisan role made for a different kind of a life than we would normally have had.

I wasn't active in political women's things, but I have always been interested in the Great Decisions group from the beginning. I went to a little study group that started meeting in the library's downstairs conference room.

A lot of people became interested in the state of the world after Second World War, making the group a little bigger, so we had meetings in homes and churches.

In Great Decisions groups we talk about world affairs. We ordered books through the extension service. Just recently, we started getting booklets from the World Affairs Council. We had about twenty-five people who meet every other week and talked about foreign affairs. This has been going on for fifty-five years. It's really an amazing thing. It's a wonderful activity and keeps me up on what's going on.

Today, for example, we talked about multilateralism, unilateralism, internationalism, and isolationism. That all led us to the United Nations: whether we believed in the United Nations or not. The United Nations represents multiple things--like environment, children, and human rights--besides what we do in protecting nations. So it's a pretty big deal. We spent an hour and a half just talking about this one thing: whether we should be multilateral or unilateral.

I: I know you belonged to several clubs.

GB: Way back in the early days there was an organization called YWEA--Young Women's Educational Association. That was an organization I belonged to early on. Mrs. Brownton had something to do with forming the group, long before television or even radio. There was a big stage at the Methodist Church, where they got together and

put on a meaningful play, had meetings and maybe refreshments, and once in a while put on a big dinner. Women from all over joined this organization. It was a wonderful organization because it allowed people to use their talents. Ruby Skeen was very involved in that.

The Neighborhood Club was a separate organization. Eventually that group and YWEA went together, and later both disappeared. They had served their purpose, but life changed once radio and television came in.

I started out at the Presbyterian Church and later became a Methodist because all the Browntons were Methodist. It didn't seem reasonable for one person to go to the Methodist church and ask the rest of the family to change to Presbyterian. I liked the Methodist Church anyway, and there's not a whole lot of difference between the two.

As a kid, Wes did everything there was to do in that church. When they needed a money-making event, they put on a Tom Thumb wedding--little people as the bride and groom. Wes participated in that. People pay money to see kids pretending to be the bride and groom. I wish that we had pictures of the Tom Thumb wedding that Sheldon [Wes's brother] and Wes were in.

I: What other clubs did you belong to?

GB: When I came back from being in the Army with Wes, I joined a group called Junior Art Research--young mothers, who were more or less confined to home raising children in those days. Some of my best friends

were in this group. We met for lunch, and someone presented a complete program on one artist, using an outline from George Nightingale [art professor at Eastern Oregon College]; his wife, Marion Nightingale, was in the group, too. We studied art from caveman to modern art, learning so much about art and really enjoying museums, knowing what we were looking at. The group met twice a month for almost fifty years before things changed for everybody, and we weren't able to meet as regularly.

Besides that, I belonged to PEO, which is an educational organization that promotes education for women, and I belong to AAUW, the American Association of University Women. It is for college graduates. I stuck with it for about twenty years, but, when Wes got sick and needed more attention, it was one thing I could drop. However, AAUW has kind of taken over Great Decisions, so I'm related to AAUW without having to be a member.

As for social clubs, a group of people who wanted to know each other better formed a little group of all kinds of different people called The Sunshine Girls. We had a great time, meeting once a month for a Saturday lunch and discussing everything there was to discuss. Once a year we had a Christmas party to include the men. Now, almost everybody is gone, which surprises me because it seemed like we would never end.

The other activities I participated in included leadership in Sunday School, 4H clubs' cooking and eating, Girl

Scout troops and also Girl Scout camping at Anthony Lakes before the ski activities started there. I was counselor, game coordinator, hiking guide; the songs from those camps still ring in my ears. I still know many girls I had as Girl Scouts. They are fifty to sixty years old now.

A sewing club also was a group that has continued for forty-five or fifty years. We still meet. We did all kinds of special sewing: handmade ornaments, knitting, needlepoint, and counted cross stitch. We always called Irma Zimmerman the Great White Knitter because she could figure out every mistake we made.

I: When did you join the hospital auxiliary group?

GB: I joined that way back when St. Joseph Hospital was going. I've been a volunteer for hospitals for a long time. When St. Joseph closed, we melded into the Grande Ronde Hospital. I was president of the auxiliary for one year.

I: So you're one of the oldest members of the Pink Ladies [i.e. another name for hospital-auxiliary members, who wear pink jackets]?

GB: Yes, I would think so.

### **Horseback Riding, Jean Birnie, and The Hen Party**

I: What did you most enjoy for recreation?

GB: What I enjoyed doing most was riding horseback. About the first person

I met coming to La Grande other than my in-laws was Jean Birnie. I think everything about my outdoor life in La Grande has been woven through her--my mentor for the rest of her life because she was such a fabulous person and very intelligent. She had taught piano lessons to both Sheldon and Wes, but she'd always been an outdoor person. Her mother said she got married on horseback and stayed on horseback the rest of her life.

She had a string of horses and was very generous with them. Every week that the weather was good, a group of about ten women rode into the hills and cooked our lunch out. We called ourselves the Antique Girl Scouts. Some of us had our own horses, and some rode her horses. It was a most wonderful time of my life! We often went on Thursdays, so I called it the maid's day off. I got a babysitter to take care of the kids.

GB: Then I was asked to go on annual summer trips called the Hen Party--for me, the coveted trip to the high mountain country. That was the real test: if I could go up hills around here, I was qualified to go with them in the high mountains [Wallowa Mountains in Wallowa County]. Incidentally, I'm the only one still living who went on these trips.

My husband happened to be an outdoor man, too, and had spent a lot of his life fishing with his father, a La Grande dentist. Their family went on lots of camping and fishing trips. So, when I moved into the family, I learned how to do things the Brown-ton way. Keep in mind that there was



no women's lib in those days. Wives were supposed to do what their husbands wanted them to do, the way the men wanted things done. Much to Wes's surprise, after I went on a horseback trip with Jean Birnie, I was telling him how to do things. I soon found that didn't work. "I know," he said, "that Jean Birnie has been doing things for a long time, but this is the way I do it." We had to back up and change our minds.

I: How did the trips begin?

GB: I'm sure Jean spent her honeymoon wandering around the mountain, thinking, "I think we could do that." We all had horses so why not go for a ride together? That led to the Hen Party trips.

I: What equipment and supplies did you take?

GB: The basic equipment was a saddle and a saddle blanket; we didn't have fancy equipment. We usually took a canvas to put up between two trees, never bothering with a tent because we all liked to sleep under the stars.

Long before we started on this wonderful trip, we met in Jean Birnie's backyard on 4th Street in La Grande. She had a barn there where she kept some of her horses; the other part of her farm was up Glass Hill Road [a spur of the present Morgan Lake Road, south of La Grande]. We planned the food for the ten-day trip. She believed in taking plenty of vegetables, meat for the first couple of days, as long as it would be safe to eat, and no canned goods.

Next we had to be sure that all of our tack was in good shape--harnesses and other horse gear. We couldn't allow ourselves to lose any little piece of leather because it would be needed and there was no way to get a new one.

I'd like to read from an article that appeared in *The Observer* in 1951: "Ten women returned to La Grande Tuesday from a horseback trip into the Whiteman and Wallowa Forest, an outing taken nearly ever year by the same women for the past twenty-five years. Unassisted, the women with fourteen horses and Kim, the dog, packed up their own equipment and traveled more than a hundred-and-thirty miles, stopping at Tombstone Lake, Diamond Lake, Minam Lake and Blue Lake. Many of the trails were uncleared and hazardous, sometimes to the point that the horsewomen found it necessary to dismount and let their horses feel their way across the dangerous spots. The group traveled approximately fifteen miles a day. Taking the trip were Mrs. George Birnie, Mrs. Albert Epling, Mrs. Thomas McGuire, Mrs. Clyde Sites, Mrs. Wesley Brownton, Mrs. Clarence Gilstrap, Mrs. Ralph Badgely, and, from Portland, Mrs. Kenneth Williamson, Mrs. Dan Reese, and Mrs. Lloyd Hassell."

We decided that we wanted to see as much of the mountains as we could, so we didn't stay and camp because we weren't necessarily interested in fishing.

I: Did you take the same trail each year?

GB: Pretty much the same trail, but, when you get up to Moss Springs, you can

go over to Catherine Creek Meadows or you can go down to the Minam. We didn't have good Forest Service maps; Jean made maps that we followed.

I: Can you take me through one day on the trail?

GB: I'd love to. When we made camp, we first took off the saddlebags, saddles, and everything else from the horses and got them ready for the night. That meant putting on hobbles--two leather pieces that are tied together with a chain. They go on the front feet so that horse can jump and eat without running away or being tied up. Hobbles aren't used anymore because of various rules and regulations, but they were common equipment except on private property.

Then we made camp, each one fixing her own bed while there was still light. We could cook in the dark. The food was in panniers [also known as alfor-

jas--canvas bags with a flap at the top] fairly well organized. The menus were already made out, so we knew what we were going to eat. Somebody got busy making a salad, somebody else making the biscuits, another frying the meat or whatever main dish we were having, and somebody going to the stream to get water. We always drank the water out of the streams; nobody worried about girardia then. As long as it was running, it was OK. That was a wonderful thing about that time.

Because we were the only ones in the mountains, we could yell and get an echo. We could also find a nice little glory hole to take a bath; nobody cared about our nakedness. We usually did that in the morning, rather than at night because we needed to see what we were doing. We didn't carry along a Coleman lamp or stove. We all had flashlights and hoped for the best.



Gerda's pack saddle, used on Hen Party trips  
Photo by Eugene Smith



Alforja, or pannier, canvas bag with a flap at the top and hung in pairs from horse's saddle  
Photo by Eugene Smith

Somebody was assigned to gathering wood and building a fire. After cooking and eating our dinners, somebody heated water so that we could wash the dishes. We had soap and towels along to do that. Then we sat around, philosophizing or singing.

- I: What did you talk about when you were philosophizing?
- GB: Religion is always a good subject, but nobody wanted to be too specific about their religion. Politics was also something, but it was a lot calmer then. Life was simpler then, and we talked about simple things. We talked about what we'd known in our lives before we got to this place--who we were. There never seemed to be any lack of conversation. Edna Sites, though, was odd because she didn't have a sense of humor. Every time we were jolly with each other, we had to say, "Edna, this is a joke."

Then we snuggled down in our sleeping apparatus, though Jean Birnie never slept in a sleeping bag. She had a way of making a bed by folding a two



Biscuit-making pan (lid at left),  
used on Hen Party trips  
Photo by Eugene Smith

blankets in such a way that she had her nice little nest to sleep in. She didn't want to be zipped up. We discovered one another's foibles quickly on a trip like this.

When we got up the next morning, we checked the horses to see that they hadn't gotten out of hand, put their halters on, and brought them back into camp. After breakfast, we used our shovels to put the fire out and packed up, on our way for the day. It was a very simple life that didn't move fast. We weren't in a great hurry. We talked about the wildflowers and the wonderful trees in the high mountains, so different from those in the lowland--the alpine pine tree, for example. It came out in the conversation that we should be loving and kind to each other and that life in the long run is all about getting to know each other and liking each other. Getting back to the real world was always very difficult because we were on Cloud Nine for these ten days or so.

- I: How did the men in everybody's lives react to your going on your own?
- GB: We must have had a bunch of good husbands because I never heard much grumbling. Maybe they were as glad to be rid of us as we were to get away from them.

I have to show you about this pan [see photo at left]. In the days before cream separators, they put milk in a pan like this and set it on a shelf in a cool room. The walls of most barns were filled with sawdust so that a room could be kept cool. When the cream

rose to the top, a special kind of a spoon took the cream off the top of the enamel milk pan.

Jean brought this pan to my attention; it's also useful for making biscuits. She melted a little butter in it and mixed up the biscuits, using her sack of flour that contained the exact number of cups she needed. She always used baking powder and cream of tartar to give the biscuits a special flavor. In the meantime, the fire was built so as to provide a bed of coals. She put the pan on the coals in a certain way and shoveled ashes onto the top to make a little oven; she used a little hot pad to move it around so as not to burn the biscuits in one place. Voila! Wonderful biscuits. She always saw that there was jam, too.

I: How many times did you go on the Hen Party?

GB: I must have gone with them about five times, but I went with my family many

more times. At one time we had seven horses. It wasn't a sophisticated thing, having horses. We rode the horses a lot. Since there were all graveled roads in this part of La Grande, it was easy to go up Glass Hill or to Morgan Lake.

I: Thank you for telling about that bit of Union County history.

### **Early Leader in La Grande Recycling**

I: Haven't you also been involved with getting recycling started here?

GB: Mary Helen Garoutte and I decided to start the recycling program because of article in the Ford magazine. We talked Fred Arnst into teaching an environmental class at the high school that incorporated how to recycle. We had several pick-ups on Washington and Fir, where people could bring their bottles, and we had a big truck that we smashed the bottles in. Another big



Hen Party group, 1930s  
Jean Birnie is the woman at far right; all of these horses belonged to her.  
Photo courtesy of Gerda Brownnton

truck was the place for tin cans. Mary Helen and I took the truck with cans over to a Walla Walla cannery; from there they were sent to the Midwest, where they were heated up and used again. Somebody else drove the truck to Portland to a glass-recycling place.

Finally, we talked the school into doing these things--having these boxes around. The high school shop class built containers so people could take their cans for dropoff at schools. We had containers for cans at every school; the city picked them up and took them to Walla Walla. The money they got bought trees for La Grande.

That was great and lasted for quite a while, as long as the interest was there and the boxes held up. But as with everything, it went by the wayside. I was active in the advisory committee for solid waste, when they built that recycling place out on Highway 82. I don't want to badmouth anybody, but they didn't build it the way it was supposed to be built and so it wasn't successful. It was unfortunate that they spent that much money and didn't do it right. But that was 30 years ago, maybe 35, when men did not think that women should be in positions like that; they really didn't want to listen to us.

### **Later Life Activities**

I: What have been some of your activities in later life?

GB: In 1963 we took a trip to Athens,

Greece. Wes was involved in a first World Peace through Law conference. One hundred and eight countries were represented. We visited 25 countries: among them, Japan, India, Nepal, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Greece, Italy, Austria, Switzerland, France, Denmark, Holland, and England. We've learned and understood so much more about the world. We later traveled to the Virgin Islands (1978), Russia (1980), Mexico and Guatemala (1984).

But most of all we enjoyed traveling around Oregon and then specializing in daily rides around Union County, checking on the state of the farms, the crops, the birds at Ladd Marsh, and all the back roads to old logging camps and mines, discovering huckleberry patches along the way.

We celebrated every family birthday, Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas with traditional food and activities on these occasions--cranberry sherbet; little, black, steamed pudding with hard sauce; blackberry jelly with chicken; and dumplings, both chicken and fruit; stollen bread and special cookies.

Each loss diminishes the whole, so things do change, but the melody lingers on.

What a wonderful place Union County is to live in, with all its richness.

## Appendix A

### Biography of Judge Wesley Brownton

Wesley Brownton, son of a dentist, came to La Grande with his parents in 1912 as a four-year-old boy. His father, Dr. H. S. Brownton, had been practicing the canyon City Oregon when the and his wife, Edna, decided that a less itinerent life mind would be beneficial for all. Dr. Brownton established a second-floor office at 1215

Adams Avenue and became a mainstay of civic life in La Grande.

When his brother, Sheldon, Wesley attended La Grande High School, where they distinguish themselves as serious students, both academically and athletically. Wesley ran the half-mile with the track team, served as president of the student body during his senior year, and was invited to membership in the National Honor Society.

Following high school, he entered the University of Washington, where he studied the liberal arts and joined a fraternity. That academic and social preparation led to his studying law at Willamette University and to admittance to the Oregon bar in 1935. After a short period of practice in Salem OR and marriage to Gerda Cornell, his return to the eastern Oregon signaled his commitment to the practice of law on his home ground. That commitment, however, was briefly put on hold when the U.S. Army called him from reserve status to active duty; he was assigned to Judge Advocate General School and serve as a JAG for four and a half years.

When he and Gerda returned to La Grande in 1945, he began twenty years of service as



an attorney, maintaining a law office in La Grande at the West Jacobsen Building and handling cases that involved all aspects of law, including criminal cases. He also became extremely active in civic causes, as his father had done: Boy Scout leadership, Lions Club, the Methodist Church, the Civic Music Association (a group, later called Community Concerts, that brought professional music and dance performers to La Grande), and the Knife and Fork Club (a group that sponsored monthly dinner speakers and that still exists).

In 1956, attorney Brownton decided to present himself as a candidate for judgeship. Elected and reelected by voters of Union and Wallowa Counties, he served in that post with distinction until his retirement from the legal profession in 1981 at age seventy-three.

During his retirement he wrote a book of family history, *Glenroc Saga*, an excerpt from which follows:

The Glenroc [a name made by spelling Gerda's maiden name, *Cornell*, backwards and replacing an *l* with a *G*] Browntons have been blessed by a rich heritage in American history. Their love and faith has been assigned to of devotion, pride and sacrifice. We have shared our successes and our failures. We have joined hands in moments of tragedy and brought some light to dispel the shadows of grief . . . Where there is love there is beauty. Where there is beauty life is good. We are thankful for this great privilege of living and growing as a family and feeling the warmth of the ultimate good of life on earth.

Judge Brownton died in 2001 at Grande Ronde Hospital, after a brief illness.

Appendix B  
**Biography of Jean McDonald Birnie**

Only daughter of an Island City physician, Dr. J. J. McDonald, and his wife, Hattie, Jean McDonald Birnie spent her entire life in Union County. From her birth in 1885 till her death in 1974, she was a prominent and much admired presence in La Grande and surrounding territory.



From childhood on, Jean was devoted to horses and the outdoors and noted for her deep knowledge of and respect for the physical environment. Her understanding of native flora and fauna was developed through close observation rather than an academic study, and she shared this information in ways that inspired others, such as Gerda Brown-ton, to develop a similar reverence for the natural environment.

She married George Birnie, a La Grande jeweler and optometrist, in 1910--a marriage that was unannounced and seemingly sudden. They left immediately for a trip by horseback into the Wallowa Mountains. The marriage and that trip marked the formal beginning of a partnership that involved horses and the outdoors, as well as Jean's part-time work in Birnie's Jewelry Store at 1108 Adams Avenue. They had one son, who died at an early age.

Jean also had a musical abilities--voice and piano--which led her to give private lessons

and to be involved in offering Community Concert programs and in the-  
atrical presentations in La Grande.

Taking care of and riding horses, though, took the largest share of her time. One of their barns was at 504 4th Street (presently occupied by the office of Dr. James McMahan, dentist), another on land they purchased a few miles from La Grande, off Glass Hill Road. She rode at least weekly with like-minded women, who looked to her for tips about horsemanship, equipment, and suitable routes through the hills surrounding La Grande. Their adopting the name An-tique Girl Scouts suggests the blend of humor and serious purpose that marked Jean's per-  
sonality and approach to living each day fully. Annual Hen Party trips into the Wallowa were testaments to her skills as leader, mentor, and charming companion.

Before her death at age eighty-eight, Jean specified that she be buried in a plain pine box, her body wrapped in an old Indian blan-  
ket. June McManus, a long-time La Grande friend, wrote in her tribute: "Her spirit will remain always singing in the Ponderosas, sparkling in a mountain stream, smiling in a wildflower, dancing in the blue sky." [*The Eastern Oregon Review*, January 10, 1974]





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