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A Reflection on a Umatilla-Morrow County Tragedy *By Bill Monagle*

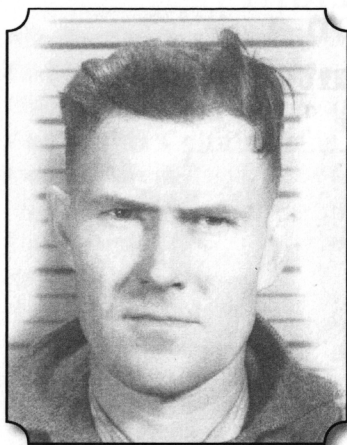


This is a story of wartime life in Umatilla and Morrow Counties as witnessed and lived by Hermiston resident Mrs. Ellen Fraser Brown and her family. The story idea originated from a suggestion by long time Morrow County resident Betty Carlson who was herself a teen-aged girl living only a few miles away in her Hermiston home at the time of the story.

There are several well-known incidents of direct attacks by the Japanese on Oregon soil during World War II. These include the shelling of Fort Stevens in June, 1942, several sinkings of ships off the Oregon Coast by submarines, An incendiary bomb attack to create forest fires in August, 1942 near Brookings and a Japanese incendiary balloon explosion near Gearhart Mountain in May, 1945, which resulted in six civilian deaths. The Ordnance Depot explosion in Morrow County on March 21, 1944, in which six civilians were killed, can also be counted as an encounter with the enemy. One in which he reached our shores and inflicted death and destruction.

Mrs. Brown graciously shared with the author her story of the Ordnance accident and its effects on her family. Additionally, she has provided a fascinating glimpse of what life was like in those days.

She is the second of the four children of Kenneth Leroy and Minnie (Riley) Fraser. The family moved from Juliaetta, Idaho,



Ellen Brown's father, Kenneth L. Fraser, at the Umatilla Ordnance Depot in 1943.

Umatilla Ordnance Depot Background

The facility known today as the Umatilla Chemical Depot was originally known as the Umatilla Ordnance Depot. It was a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers project created in response to the increasing international tensions of the time to provide a facility to store and maintain conventional munitions. The location near Hermiston was selected because it was safely inland and accessible to major railroads. Planning began in the summer of 1940. 19,000 acres of land in north Morrow and Umatilla Counties were obtained in March of 1941. Construction began shortly thereafter. The site opened for business

in March, 1942, for job opportunities that were being publicized around a mysterious military project near Hermiston. Kenneth was hired and soon made a crew foreman at the new facility. The family settled in Irrigon, where the children attended the local schools. At the time of the accident, Mrs. Brown (Ellen) was fifteen and a sophomore at Irrigon High School. Her older brother, Elton, had turned seventeen the month before the accident. During his junior year in 1945, he joined the Army, and a few years later he earned his high school diploma. Ellen's younger brother, James "Jim", was nearly thirteen. Her younger sister, Maxine, was eleven.



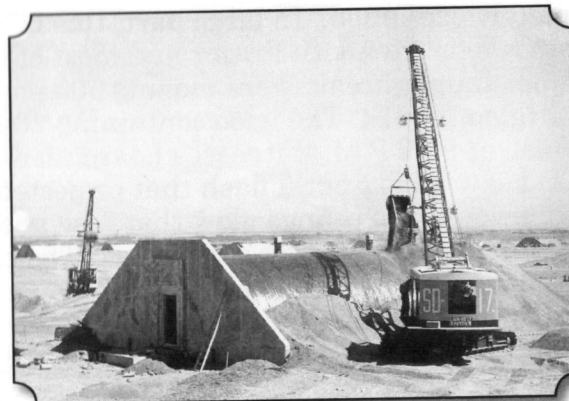
Children of Kenneth and Minnie Fraser taken about 1938 in Juliaetta, Idaho, north of Lewiston. From left to right are Maxine; Elton; James "Jim"; and Clara Ellen. Their dog Ritzie is in front.

in October 14, 1941, just six weeks before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. In addition to the core of the project consisting of 1001 concrete encased storage igloos spread across twenty-six square miles, a massive supporting infrastructure was constructed. This included 200 miles of roads, forty miles of railroad, administrative buildings, housing and support facilities. Upwards of 7,000 workers were employed during the construction phase. Hermiston's population went from about 800 to 8,000 overnight. This major boost to Hermiston

and its neighbors proved to be permanent, sending it on the course leading to today's bustling commercial and industrial center. During the war years, the great majority of depot workers were civilians of which 27% were women. In 1943, the government built the town of Ordnance located just across Highway 30 from the Depot. It boasted a school, post office, restaurant, gas station, and theater. Pingree's Restaurant owner also opened Pingree's Cafeteria, which was located inside the Depot. Clara Ellen Fraser worked swing shift there on Fridays and Saturdays during her last few years at Irrigon High School. Part of her duties included bringing meals to the sites where workers took their lunch breaks.

The Accident

The tragic accident of March 21, 1944, has never been com-



Construction of the igloos in 1941

pletely explained. In large part, this is because no witnesses survived. Kenneth Fraser and most of his crew, back at work from supper break, were moving 500 pound bombs into or out of Igloo B-1014. The igloo containing 264 bombs went up in a flash at 9:29 P.M. Witnesses heard an extremely loud noise and saw a horizontal flash that projected northward. This was followed by an orange glow that rose about 200 feet over the area and remained for some time. The crater remained hot for several days. The blast was limited to a single igloo, owing to some wise engineering implementations including graduated thinning of igloo concrete from bottom to top and the distant spacing of the igloos. The distance between igloos of about 200 yards is much more than what appears to the eye as viewed from Interstates 84 and 82.

Six people in Kenneth Fraser's crew died. Five were men who each left a wife and children. A total of thirteen children were left fatherless. The sixth person was a young woman of twenty named Alice Wolgamott, who had recently moved to Hermiston from the Midwest and lived with her sister and brother-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. Peterson. The names of the other men were Hiram Cook, William Sanders, Harry Sever, and Lance Stultz. Two of Kenneth's crew, Glenn Long and Cecil Pennington, survived because they were away from the site working at a nearby railroad pier. Amazingly, the accident was the only fatal munitions accident in the seventy-four year history

of the facility. This is remarkable considering the almost unimaginable volume of extremely hazardous materials handled in that time that included three major wars.



The four Fraser siblings last photographed together in 1995, in Hermiston. From left to right are: Jim Fraser; Ellen (Fraser) Brown; Maxine (Fraser) Menager Leonard; and Elton Fraser

The experience of Ellen Fraser Brown and her family

Elton and Ellen Fraser both had part time jobs at

the depot in 1944. Elton usually would have been in his father's crew, but as it was a Tuesday and a school night, he was home studying at the time of the accident. Ellen worked part time in Pingree's Cafeteria, which was located within the Depot's main entrance. She also was at home at the time of the explosion.

Although the family heard and felt the blast that evening, news was slow in coming. They had no phone. The family, apprehensive and fearing the worst, got no information until after midnight. Ellen remembers waking up to hear her mother crying. A local minister had brought the sad news.

Identification of the victims was especially difficult as no identifiable remains were available. One method was to see whose cars remained in the parking lot after the shift. Elton had the sad duty of bringing his father's



Two views of the aftermath around igloo B-1014. Today, the site is marked with a white cross.



Photo taken in 1945 in Kendrick, Idaho, a year after the accident, shows Minnie (Riley) Fraser in the middle surrounded by her children: Maxine, Elton (home on leave), James "Jim", and Clara Ellen.

car home the following day.

Ellen's mother, faced with a very difficult situation, took their loss very hard.

Afterward and beyond

Even though the era of Social Security benefits had begun in the 1930's, Ellen's mother, Minnie (Riley) Fraser, was eligible only for a very small Federal stipend of \$94 per month. To make matters worse, this stipend was decreased as each child reached the age of eighteen. Minnie Fraser, wanting to remain in the area and to hold her family together, went to work in the high school cafeteria. She remarried fifteen years later and moved to Stanfield and lived there until her death in 1988.

Ellen graduated from Irrigon High School in 1946. She went back to the Depot the same summer, working in procurement. As class valedictorian, Ellen received a scholarship. She laughs when thinking about the amount, which was \$78 dollars to pay for three terms tuition her freshman year at Eastern Oregon College of Education. She went to that college, as did her Irrigon High School friend, Bob Brown, whom she had met when she was thirteen. They had dated some during the latter part of high school and later in college. They've now been married for sixty-five years and had a daughter, two sons, and six grandchildren. Daughter Vickie worked about thirty years for U.S. Bank, most of it at their loan center near Portland. Sons Gary and Daryl have had successful careers in science and engineering fields. Sadly, Gary passed away in late April, 2015, with early onset Alzheimer's disease.

Bob and Ellen are very proud of their six grandchildren who are carrying on a family tradition of work and excellence.



Robert "Bob" and Ellen (Fraser) Brown on Christmas Eve, 1956, in Hermiston, Oregon, with their children: Gary, Daryl, and Vickie.

Both Ellen and Bob had teaching careers. Ellen taught mainly third and fourth grades and eight years of junior high school English (grades 7-9), totaling thirty-two years, twenty nine of them in Hermiston. Over half of Bob's thirty years in teaching in Hermiston was at the sixth grade level and the remainder doing team teaching in lower elementary grades.

Today, Ellen and Bob live quietly in a lovely Hermiston home where Ellen devotes herself to Bob's care as he struggles with some health problems. She looks forward to soon getting back into genealogy, a favorite hobby. Bob looks forward to soon spending some time again in his woodworking shop. They both have fond memories of their travels throughout the United States during retirement years.

Elton Fraser went into the Army in 1945. By the time he finished training, the Pacific war had ended. He was sent to the clean-up of Okinawa, the scene of a most devastating battle. It was still filled with the horror of war.

James "Jim" Fraser became a front-line infantryman in the Korean War. Jim had four military commendations including the United Nations Service Medal; National Defense Service Medal; Korean Service Medal with two bronze stars; and a combat Infantry Badge. He also had earned a sharp shooter's badge during training. He was the only survivor when his squad took a Chinese/North Korean artillery round. He was affected thereafter with what we now know as PTSD, post traumatic stress disorder. He suffered the effects

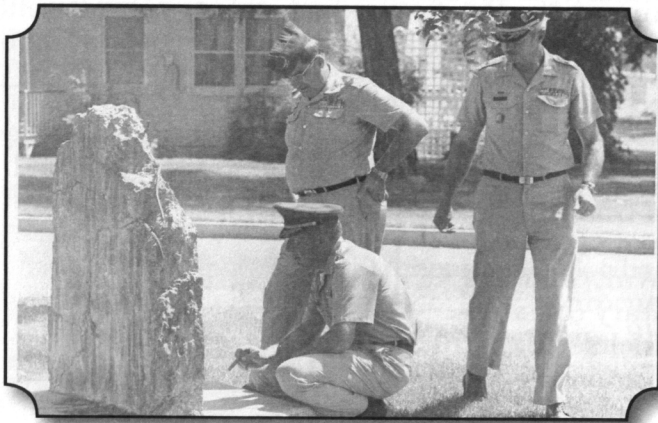


Jim Fraser, March 1953 in Irrigon, Oregon. He was home on furlough before leaving for Korea.

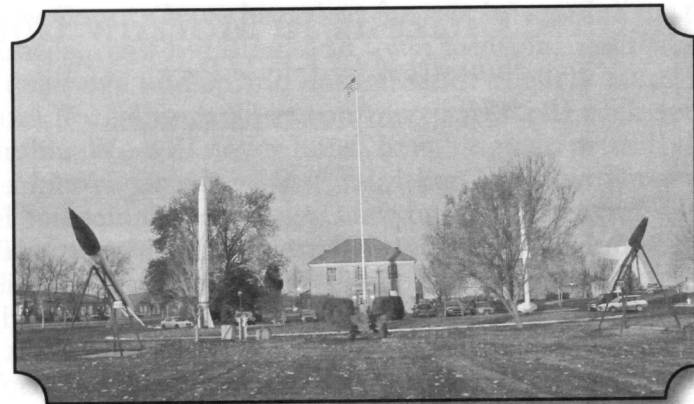
for the rest of his life.

A regret that Ellen has is that the remains of the five men victims have been lost. The army admits they once had possession of the remains but now they can't be found. Pictures are available. Family requests for the location of the remains are unanswered. Her father is memorialized at the grave-site of her mother and stepfather.

Ellen's mother and step-father are buried in the Hermiston Cemetery. A memorial inscription with information about her father, Kenneth Fraser is given at the bottom of the stone.



The largest remaining fragment of Igloo B-1014 was made into a monument, placed near the post parade grounds, commemorating those who lost their lives.



Present day headquarters building of the Umatilla Chemical Depot. Chemical disposal operations are now complete. The facility is now operated by the Oregon National Guard.

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