

WILLA CUMMINGS CARLSON

Part 2

Interviewed by

Sam Schrager

Oral History Project

Latah County Museum Society

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WILLA CUMMINGS CARLSON

American Ridge, Troy; b. 1896

schoolteacher; farm wife

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Willa Cummings Carlson

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00 (cont.) The doctor went after women. His wife went back east after he died.

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Side D

00 84 (cont.) George takes Mae and the trunk to the train, and searches for Walter. Mae disappears, and is never heard from again. They try to trace her, unsuccessfully.

with Sam Schrager
Helen Johnson
Mavis Lee Utley*
May 7, 1974

* Mavis Lee Utley is Willa Carlson's daughter.

II. Transcript

Willa Cummings Carlson recalls some strange events in the past-- the disappearance of Mae Downing in suspicious circumstances, an account of Winnie Booth just before she was found dead in Orofino, and the moving of a young girl's grave from a country cemetery. She also speaks of the family of Frank May, who was among the first pioneers of American Ridge, and with Helen Johnson recalls deaths of children from tuberculosis on Burnt Ridge.

SAM SCHRAGER: What's the story?

WILLA CUMMINGS CARLSON: Well she was buried up there in the Burnt Ridge Cemetery, the girl was. Well why in the wide world they decided to move her, that's something I don't remember.

MAVIS LEE UTLEY: Well they moved the whole cemetery, didn't they?

W C: I don't think so.

MLU: I was thinking they were moving all the cemetery, everybody that'd been buried there.

W C: I don't think so. Just their lot, or something like that. But anyway, there was some reason why they were going to move her from where she was to where she wasn't. And they took it out, and they wanted to open the casket. And I remember--

MLU: What I was saying was her father insisted on opening the casket. There were several men working out there.

W C: Well it seemed to me it was Old Grandpa Larsen, as they called him... Anyway it was a girl by the name of Larsen would be as far as I'd dare go. I wouldn't dare tell which family she belonged to...Anyway they opened the casket--

MLU: She'd been dead for a couple of years.

W C: I don't remember just how long she'd been dead, but she'd been dead quite a long while. And had wintered out there anyway. I don't know but what it was more than two years. And my goodness, her cheeks were pink and she looked so natural. And my goodness, they were all startled to death.

MLU: The men didn't want him to open the casket--

W C: No.

MLU: -- The father. And they tried to keep him from doing it, just move the casket. And he insisted on prying it open, and then they found her in this perfect condition. 'Cause they thought it would be too frightening, you

know, he really couldn't stand seeing her all decayed and everything.

SAM: So what did they think?

W C: Yes, I remember different theories expressed. Somebody said, well they thought she died of this tubercular condition, and that that left them with a red cheek and snow-white skin. Of course that was also Scandinavian, you know. There were very blond, the Larsens were. And that she must have been alive. And of course I, knowing now what I know, why I don't believe that at all of course. But they thought that she'd been buried alive. Well, some man had sense enough to say no, anything like that, there would have been gasses, you know, naturally. Where they are alive when they're buried, the natural gasses just simply burst the coffin. It does happen. Sometimes a person is buried alive, but there's all kinds of destruction brought about by it. That was pointed out by people who happened to know, Paul said.

Daddy knew, he heard all about this. I don't know but what he was there.

MLU: It seems to me like maybe Daddy was there helping move this cemetery.

W C: I'm not sure but what he was too. But as soon as the air got to her, she fell to pieces. So they went and opened the casket again, and of course she fell to dust. That's what happens.

MLU: But then they kind of decided though that she'd been buried next to a water vein or something?

W C: Yeah, there was a vein of water that ran right past it, and that was ice cold water, because it ran off of a hill back of it. It was terribly cold. And it'd kept it in perfect condition, being underground and no air getting to it. But as soon as they opened the casket and air entered it, the second time they looked at it she was just nothing. It'd just all fallen to dust around the bones.

SAM: Did this shake the father up a lot?

W C: Oh they were all shaken up, I should say.

MLU: Well I thought that he almost went nuts.

W C: No, I didn't know that. It takes a lot to put a Swede nuts.

MLU: I don't know why, but it seems to me like I remember that--

W C: I don't remember that. I don't know. Of course he was shaken, they all were all shaken. Some of them didn't want to prowl around the cemetery any more.

MLU: I don't know. As I remember the experience as a kid, I thought it was a fascinating story.

W C: They used to always be telling stories. I heard several stories about people being buried alive, but I know now, as a grown person and know about conditions, I know it couldn't have been true, they were just fanciful tales.

MLU: Well I didn't get that idea about that story, that she'd been buried alive. But what I got was that the father took it as a sign from God though that she had been chosen and was select and special.

W C: Oh I don't think that. I don't know, Mavis, but I never heard that. No, it was the buried-alive theory. And that was what Paul's mother was always talking about. She wondered. She wondered because she was a little susceptible, former was. She wondered if she could have been buried alive.

SAM: How had she died?

W C: Well as Helen (Johnson) said here today, if it weren't tuberculosis, it was--she had her funny way of saying TB...

SAM: Since we're talking about death, that reminds me of you telling me about Mrs. Eliot's account of Winnie Booth's leaving her. Would you tell me that?

W C: Would I tell you that? I did tell you that.

SAM: Yeah, but we didn't take it down, it was just when we were talking a long time ago.

W C: Well Mrs. Eliot was always saying, "Well you be careful about who you leave and go to American Ridge with, or go over home with, when you leave here.

Because we think too much of you to have the same thing happen to you that happened to Winnie Booth when she stayed down here on this bench." No other teacher I guess had ever boarded down there since Winnie had. Because you see I lived down, it was on a bench, a way down under, it was like going down to the bottom of the canyon to go up to my school every day. My folks didn't like me to stay there, at the Waite's, but my goodness, I never was better, I mean healthier, in my life, than I was that year, and I loved it there. I didn't mind the climb. Of course it was always nice to get a ride up the hill. And Mrs. Eliot was not my landlady, but she lived close there. And it was when she came up there to see how I was getting along with it when they were all sick with the flu but me, and it was kind of lucky to have me around. I knew how to do a few things. I even baked bread for 'em on Saturday, you know, and I cooked for them. They didn't need much to eat. They were all sick with flu. But she said that that day Winnie had--I don't remember this, here's a link that I've left out. I don't know whether she was going to come back down and had intended to in the beginning, come back down there before she left, or--no, she didn't know she was going to leave, that was it. That was it, because here she said came Winnie down in the evening after her school was out with this old doctor...Well he looked like a hypnotist. (I've seen his picture, it used to hang in the old Gritman Hospital before they built this new one. I just wonder if that picture is preserved. I imagine it is. I'll bet it's up in the Museum.) I can't think of his name now, but he looked like a hypnotist--big old dark eyes, bulging out. But anyway here he came in a rubber-tired buggy, you know, and a fancy driving team. He came driving Winnie down to her boarding place. And she said she wanted to pick up a few things, that she was going away for the weekend. Mrs. Eliot thought she was going home for the weekend. So she got these few things and went. And she kissed Mrs. Eliot goodbye. And of course she said she guessed she read

in things after she heard what happened. She might have read thing into it, but it seemed to her that Winnie was a little sad when she told her goodbye. Oh they just thought the world of Winnie, she was the sweetest girl they'd ever known. And she said she just felt bad after they'd gone off, and she said to her husband that she didn't like the looks of that man a bit. "No," he said, he didn't either. He understood it was married man that'd come out here after Winnie, and he didn't like it at all.

And the next day the news was out. They didn't go to Moscow at all; they went to Orofino. Took a room at the hotel--Mr. and Mrs. something-or-other, I think under his name. And they left notes. She left a note to her father. And she said that this was the only way out, she was sorry it had to be this way. They had taken poison, had drinks and he'd poisoned 'em. And that was standing beside the bed; and they were both dead. Well that was a nine-day sensation, don't forget that. Around here everybody talked about it. And again it was Mr. Roberts that came up and told my folks. And don't forget, I was standing around, I was just like Mavis, I was taking in everything (chuckles). Mavis was very samll when she's taking in a lot of the stories that she's heard. And I was the same way about all of those stories. I never forgot the name of Winnie Booth. Then my goodness after I was married, Paul told about Winnie Booth had been his Sunday school teacher. And he and all the other little boys, they talked about when they got big they were going to marry a girl that looked like Winnie Booth. And Winifred was his favorite name. Mavis came almost being Winifred.

MLU: I certainly wish I had been.

SAM: So she was rather pretty.

W C: According to Paul she was a beautiful girl. I never saw her picture even.

SAM: Did Mrs. Eliot say that Winnie said anything to her when she said goodbye?

W C: Nothing that would indicate what she was going to do, but she did say that

she acted kind of sad. And she told her goodbye, and she gave her something. I've forgotten what it was. She said she wanted her to have it. It wasn't oh anything so terribly special, but Mrs. Eliot didn't feel she would have given it if she hadn't felt she wasn't coming back.

SAM: As I recall when you talked to me about it before, you mentioned that she had said "Thank you".

W C: Yes, she turned away and started out, and then she turned around and came back and put her arms around Mrs. Eliot, and thanked her for everything she had done for her. All the nice things she'd been doing for her. She did that. She did say that. And I think she said she left her something. I can't quite remember that. And Mrs. Waite, who was my landlady, of course is gone.

SAM: When you say it was a nine-day wonder, what were most of the people thinking then? That she had been hypnotized, or what?

W C: Yes, they blamed him. They thought he was a hypnotist and a hypocrite and I don't know what all not. And he was a middle-aged man and here this was a young girl, her first term of school. Only 19 or 20--I think she was 19, very young.

MLU: And he was married?

W C: Yes, he was married.

MLU: And then how did his wife--?

W C: Now I'll tell you, the thing about me is being kind of unsure about this what I'm telling except just what I heard from Mrs. Eliot--that was straight to me, from somebody that knew her. And what Daddy said to me--that's straight from Dad. But other things I can't be so sure about, because I heard so many things from so many different people that it's probably just a lot of talk. Because there was TALK! Everybody talked, everybody talked. And about what should have been done to him and one thing another. It was too late to do

anything. He'd gone to Orofino and that was it.

MLU: Well he'd kind of taken care of it himself.

W C: Yes.

SAM: Well that talk is interesting. Even though it's just hearsay, it just tells you what people were thinking at the time.

W C: Yes, well they were thinking, and believe me, they were furious with that man...

* * * * *

SAM: OK, well how about the disappearance of Mae Downing?

W C: Well, the Downing family came here, and they lived what we called up above Troy about two miles. It was that house, you know, Mavis, up there almost opposite the school. A fairly good looking house as you go out towards Big Meadows, but not very far up into it. And I believe it's still there, with the red roof and red trim on the house. Well they came out, this family, Downings. Mr. Downing was a kind of a cripple. I don't know what, but as I think about how he was, kind of a rheumatic or arthritic cripple. He used a cane all the time, wasn't able to do anything, but he did write some. Did some writing, of course Clara always said. And they had a family of girls, I think it was five. And they all came there when they first came. Ida is the oldest one I think, and as far as I know Ida's still living. And then the one that was married soon after they came, and she's the one that was married to this George something-or-other, and they lived over on the coast. I'm short on names now! I knew all these at one time. But there were the two older girls, Ida and Mae, it was Ida and Mae. And then this girl that was married to George, she lived over at Portland. They never did live up here, she'd come to visit. And then there were the two young girls, and that was Clara (or Kelly, they called her. Everybody called her Kelly but me, and

they said when they came here she registered in school as Clara Downing). And Babe Downing, the youngest one. She had another name too, but I never got onto that because she wasn't in any class of mine. Neither was Clara, but Clara, I was kind of attracted to her, so I always knew Clara, met her right away...

Well, after a couple of years, Clara got to going with a boy out on American Ridge close to us, and a very good friend of my brother's. I have his picture someplace--Marvin Chaney and Orville taken together, their picture. And Marvin married Clara. Well Ida married a fellow in Spokane, and Mae went up there to work. Well Clara of course wanted Mae to be along with her, and she was always angling for Orville to go with Mae, always. And he went with her some. Poppa said she was too old for him if she was older than Orville, and he was very much against this. And Mae wasn't the colorful lady that Clara was. Clara I thought was quite colorful, and she was good looking and she made up well, and she looked so nice when she was dressed up. Much better than Mae, but Mae did seem to be a lovely girl, she was a very nice girl. Ida was a school teacher and she went to teaching. In the summertime she'd come up to Spokane and get some job around some restaraunt there, usually as a cashier because she was good at that. And Mae used to go up there and work with her. And finally one summer she went up there it wasn't so long after Downings had come here, she went up there, and Ida was married to Ralph something-or-other, and Ida said, "Ralph and I are going to get you married this time." So they got her introduced to this Walt Stevenson, Walter Stevenson. And my goodness she did get married, and she didn't know him too awful long. I don't know just how long, but she didn't know him too long and she married Walter Stevenson.

Well they were all a great family to be together, the girls. Clara said they always were together a lot, and they used to have Kodak pictures taken

of the family, and one thing another. Walt was a clown, he was a small fellow (she described him, I never saw him)--and he'd run around from one to the other and pop behind them and then out again when the picture was snapped, and then hide. When they went to look for a picture, they didn't have a single sign of^a/picture of him, Kodak picture. He'd avoided them all. But they hadn't thought about it at the time. Well I don't know how long they were married, but it was four or five years. And in that time, Clara was sick. And Mae said, "Well now that Marvin can't work out on the farm, you come to Spokane and stay with us here. The apartment's big enough for you and Marvin to come up and live in this apartment." Oh, I think they got another room or two to add to it. Apartments were plentiful at that time. And they had the baby, Billy was the baby. So they went up there to stay that year. And of course Walter was gone. And then Mae said it was so nice to have Clara there so that they wouldn't be alone. She just hated to be alone all the time. Walter was always gone.

MLU: What was his business, do you remember that, or what he professed to be?

W C: Oh he was supposed to be a bond salesman. His aunt had left him a fortune and he had to manage his aunt's property. And he was constantly going to Chicago to take care of his aunt's property. So they never did know exactly what he was doing. But he had been a bond salesman, so he claimed.

MLU: He'd been a decent provider though, as far as Mae was concerned?

W C: Oh yes apparently so. I never heard Clara--and she would have been the first one to say it--I never heard her say anything about the way he provided. I think everything was provided all right. But after awhile, Mae said that Walter was gonna be gone a long while, and she was gonna go down and stay with Lila. But she wanted to visit Clara before she went to visit Lila, so she was going to come down here. And so she brought a great big trunk, all locked and oh, it was a heavy thing, Clara said. And she said, "I didn't know what

in the world to do with that trunk." She said, "Walter told me that I had to take it with me wherever I went, that I was to take that trunk. So I had to bring it down here, and when I go down to Lila's I've got to take it down there." So Clara thought it was an awful nuisance, she said, and she's very outspoken, so she didn't much like the idea of having that trunk around. "What's in it?!" Well, Mae didn't know what was in it, and she said, "I don't care." "Well I'd care! If it was Marvin's trunk, I'd open it. I wouldn't keep a trunk that I didn't know what was in it." And she talked that way all the time it was here. And Mae said, "Well you don't need to get into that trunk." "Well," she said, "do you know what's in it?" "No!" No, she didn't. Clara told me that they had that kind of a conversation several times, and Clara would be persistent about a thing like that, because that was her way.

Well, finally they got a telegram from George, Lila's husband, saying that she was sick, and if Mae was coming, wouldn't she come now and stay with her. George had to leave a few days, and his wife didn't want to be alone. She thought it would be nice to have her there. So he got ready, she said yes, she'd come down. She got ready to go, and of course the trunk had to be taken down and mailed too, express, down to Portland. So Mae and the trunk left Clara's. And I don't know now for time, but not too long afterward--There was some little thing--she had had word, she'd had a telephone call from him, from Chicago, while she was at Clara's. He sent her a document, and he wanted her to go down to Troy and sign it before a notary public. And it was for the disposal of a hotel. And she did it, and sent it to him, whatever she got. That was the only thing of any significance, Clara said, that she seemed to hear from Walter. I don't remember about her hearing from him, but I think a card now and then. It wasn't much.

MLU: Yeah, it did seem to me he was on the phone more. Was that property in

Chicago which they disposed?

W C: Yes. Yes. But he sent the thing to her, but she had to have her name on it, and she had to go before a notary public and sign it. And it was a lot of money, I don't remember what the amount was, but it was a lot of money. Well, Mae was down there and wasn't down there very long, until one night there was a telephone call after ten o'clock that came to George's. George answered and he said it was Walter and wanted to know if Mae was there. And he said, "Well, George, will you get ready and take her down to the railroad station." He said, "I want her to meet me. It has to be tonight." "Oh," George said, "surely not tonight." Oh it was stormy, it was just terrible! He said, "I can't leave long," he said, "I don't want to leave my wife alone very long." "Well," he said, "get somebody else then, or she can come in a cab. Go down to the railroad station," and he told her which one, in Portland. And he said, "I want her to meet me at" such and such a place. And I used to remember that name, but I don't remember it now, but it was a little suburb of Portland. He said, "I want her to meet me there." Well he said, "Wait just a minute, you talk to Mae." And he said to Mae, "I don't know whether that's Walter or not. I don't know." He said, "You talk to him and find out." So she went to the telephone, and "Oh Walter, is that you?" And she was just overjoyed to hear him. She said why certainly she'd come there. So then when she got off the telephone, George said, "Now do you know that that was Walter talking?" "Oh yes!" she said, "I'd know his voice any place. Of course it was Walter! What makes you say such a thing?" "Well," he said, "I didn't think he talked right." And he said, "What in the dickens does he want you to meet him out there in that godforsaken place for? It's just a little bit of a suburb," Walter said, "I know the place well, and I don't know why he'd want you to meet him there on a rainy night." And he said, "I don't think there's a thing there but just a little shelter."

(End of Side C)

MLU: Wasn't there a question as to whether Walter was actually calling from the place he said he was?

W C: Yes, yes. And he immediatly put in a call and asked where that call was from at central. And he got the word--you don't always, you know, when you do that--but he got the word back that it was a Portland pay phone.

MLU: And he had said that he was calling from someplace else, didn't he?

W C: Yah, he said this little town outside of Portland.

MLU: And Mae got angry with him for having the call traced.

W C: Oh yes, she was madder than the dickens.

MLU: If Walter said he was there, that's where he was.

W C: Yes, she didn't like anything that George did. Well, George talked to his wife. And he said to her, "I don't like it, I don't like it." He said, "If you were better, stronger, I would go with Mae out there." She didn't want him to leave her either. I don't see why they couldn't have gotten somebody to stay with her, but so far as I know they didn't. And he took Mae down and--

MLU: With the trunk, right?

W C: With the trunk, yes.

MLU: That was part of the orders.

W C: Oh yes, to bring the trunk. And where they sent the trunk I don't know, I don't think Clara knew. Or when I talked to her. I don't know if they did. So they went down there. He took this precaution, George did: he got on the train to look for Walter, and he went through the entire train. And he asked the conductor--he wasn't on the passenger list. They don't have the passengers down, I don't know why they had any. They've always said that he wasn't on the passenger list. But at least they didn't know of anybody of that description that was there, didn't hear any word of him at all. He said, "Mae, well I hate to leave you without finding him." Oh she had some excuse for him, he

was probably worried about the trunk, out to get the trunk. Well he wasn't out to get the trunk.

MLU: You mean George went clear with her to the suburb, or put her on at a main train in Portland to go to the suburb?

W C: Just to go to the suburb, that was all. But he was just sure that he would come in there, but he wasn't there. No, he didn't go out the suburb, he didn't want to leave his wife, you see. He just put her on the train. So when he got home, he asked when that would hit that suburb, and he knew when the train would get there. And he called up and asked if a man answering that description had gotten off the train. He knew that there would be so few get off it, you know, at that time of night in that little station, that they'd know. And there was no one that answered the description that got off there.

SAM: Or had gone to meet it maybe? He might have gone to meet it there too.

W C: Yeah. No telling what. Well they didn't know. Bubbleheads. I just thought it was awful! I thought they should have found out, but then maybe I'd have been just as dumb. And especially when you have to pay money, you know--people aren't always long on cash, you know, to get things done. I don't know. But I've always felt that it was certainly^a/foolish thing that nobody learned about that. Well at first--

MLU: That was the last she was seen?

W C: Last time. And they never got any word from her.

MLU: Nor of Walter?

W C: No. Never a word, never a line. Clara had addressed an envelope to her home for Mae to write to her when she got there, because she knew how careless Mae was about carrying letters around. Clara did that. George said, "You telephone me from there. And if something happens you can't telephone me tonight, you telephone me the first thing in the morning." And if something

had happened, he just had a hunch Walter might prevent it, or want to prevent it. He said, "You telephone me." And she promised him faithfully that she would. Well they never heard from her, they never saw her, they don't know a thing, that's the last that anybody saw of Mae Downing. Now she was not a beautiful girl, but she was nice looking, and always nicely dressed. She wasn't beautiful, she wasn't a startling looking girl, rather plain I thought Mae was. A very nice girl.

MLU: But this George, her brother-in-law, always had a funny feeling about him, about Walter.

W C: Always did. He always had had. She made that remark to him: "George, you never have trusted Walter!" Well, he said, you bet he hadn't. But his wife insisted, you know, he not say anything more to Mae about it. Well I said, "Did you ever do anything about it?" Yes, she said that Ida's husband, who was an up-and-coming fellow, they went back to Chicago; and he says, "Well he used to work at such-and-such a place. So he went there to see if he'd been there; they hadn't heard from him for years. They didn't know where he was. But they knew he'd gone to some other street in Chicago and might be over there, and they might know. So he did follow up two or three leads as to where he might be. But he'd left every one of the places. They all knew him, but he wasn't at any of them. So he went down to the Department of Missing Persons and registered him. "Well, have you got a picture?" No, he didn't have a picture of any kind. But Ralph it seems had had an idea where he and Walter had been together. Ralph was a meat cutter; he always had a good job at some big shopping center where he could be a meat cutter. Walter was cashier or something around these eating places too, it seemed. And he had a notion that they'd been in a big group picture once together. He got that but it was very poor and indistinct. Clara said you couldn't've told much by it, she didn't think.

SAM: Do you know if Mae had the key to the trunk?

W C: No, I don't think she did.

SAM: So she didn't know what was in it?

W C: Oh no, she didn't know what was in it. She didn't know what was in it.

And when he sent for her to get that paper signed, he sent her the paper, it was another paper. It was a legal paper he sent her to get it signed. It wasn't that she was to open the trunk and get anything out of the trunk.

I was all worked up about that when I heard it.

SAM: I assume the trunk disappeared along with her. Did they know where she got off the train?

W C: Only what they'd heard, only what he'd told her to do.

MLU: But there was no record from any of the railroad stations, and no one saw, and they couldn't account for her trunk or anything like that?

W C: No, nothing. None of her belongings, nothing was accounted for. I know Clara used to say that oh they'd gone, different ones of 'em had gone so many places, you know, when a body is found different places. And they went and examined the bodies. Even her mother had gone two or three times. "Why did you go by yourself, mother?" Well, she said she was afraid it was a lead, and if she let it go, you know, nobody would do it, by the time she got help. And she just got some friend to go with her. And she checked on several, I don't know how many. Because they do find them. They're always finding them out there on the coast too.

SAM: Did it go on for many years, their search? Did it continue for a long time?

W C: Yes. But then that wasn't a systematic search. Their little searches, you know, didn't amount to much. But Ralph had gone to Chicago, Kansas City, St. Louis; and Clara said he was going to go to New Orleans, but I don't know that he did. But he did go into their Departments of Missing Persons.

SAM: Did they feel that she was dead?

W C: No, they don't tell you whether they feel or not, you know. It isn't their business to feel, and so they don't tell ya anything.

SAM: No, I mean her family. Did her family assume that that's what had happened, and not that perhaps she had just gone off with him, and they'd disappeared together?

W C: They took that into consideration too. They were intelligent people. And they did think of that, but Clara didn't think so. She thought he made away with her. And George was sure of it! (The phone rings.) He didn't think for one minute that they'd ever see her again--Hello.

Transcribed by Claudia Limb and Sam Schrager

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