

Speech to Baker County Historical Society on 4-6-1987  
by Gary Dielman

(The speech was about the significance of the Oregon Trail and whether a \$6,000,000 interpretive center should be built east of town.)

I want to begin my talk tonight by reading my favorite passage from the journal of Meriwether Lewis. It was written on the evening of October 15, 1805. The Lewis and Clark Expedition had just finished a day of floating down Snake River from the mouth of Clearwater River headed toward the confluence of Snake and Columbia rivers. Lewis looked south from a vantage point above Snake River and made this observation:

“The plains are waving, and as we walked in them, we could plainly discover a range of mountains bearing southeast and northwest, becoming higher as they advanced towards the north, the nearest point bearing south about sixty miles from us.”

The mountains he is referring to are the Blue Mountains. This was about as close to Baker County as the Lewis and Clark Expedition got. That is the importance of the passage for me. But, of course, the major importance of the expedition was that it paved the way for further expeditions and helped lay claim to the Oregon Territory for the United States.



Robert Stuart, First to Blaze the Oregon Trail

The next expedition took place just five years later, when Wilson Price Hunt led the overland Astor Expedition along part of the Oregon Trail. Then in 1812, Robert Stuart of the Astor Expedition led a party back to the States. He is credited with being the first to go the full length of the Oregon Trail. It is curious to note that this party blazed the trail in reverse.

The Astor Expedition was followed immediately by the fur trappers. Next came the missionaries in the middle 1830's.

And finally starting in the 1840's, it was the settlers who turned the trail into a wagon road which carried one of the largest migrations of people in the history of mankind. The Oregon Trail is a 2000-mile-long symbol for the settlement of the West. The settlers who trudged those many miles—many walked, not rode, the whole way—helped lay the claim for the United States to the vast territory west of the Rocky Mountains. The British and the Spanish were determined to make the territory theirs. They had arguably valid claims to the area through their early explorations by sea and overland through Canada. But settlers were the United States' trump card in negotiations with the British in the Northwest and were crucial to the defeat of the Spanish in California.

For many of us who live on the Oregon Trail, the trail is part of our lives we take for granted. We don't think much about it. Some of us may not realize what a tremendous fascination the Oregon Trail holds for many people for whom it has the same historical significance and mystique as Jamestown, the Mayflower and Plymouth Rock, and the Liberty Bell. Even foreigners, as evidenced by the recent visit of the journalist from Great Britain, are captivated by stories of the pioneers on the dusty trail beset by lack of water and feed, dissension among themselves, disease, and occasional inhospitable Indians.

And some people here in Eastern Oregon may not realize what a crucial part Baker County played in the history of the Oregon Trail. For the most part, the Oregon Trail followed the path of least resistance and distance from the Mississippi River to the Willamette Valley. Travelers had some leeway to go a little north or south, to take a cutoff here or a shortcut there. But when the trail got to Baker County, there was in the beginning only one route: up the dreaded Burnt River Canyon. As one teenager asked his father as they looked into the canyon from the hills near Huntington: "Do we have to go down into that awful place?"

Eastern Oregon, with its Burnt River Canyon and the Blue Mountains, presented the pioneers their first real mountainous terrain. By comparison, South Pass through the Rocky Mountains in western Wyoming is flat. Even the indomitable Marcus Whitman in August 1836 abandoned his two-wheel cart on the east bank of Snake River near Ontario rather than battle his way with it up Burnt River Canyon and over the Blues. Narcissa Whitman gave this explanation:

"Perhaps you will wonder why we left our wagon, having taken it so nearly through. Our animals were failing and the route in crossing the Blue Mountains is said to be impassable for it."

Burnt River Canyon was an uninviting passageway, but, as some learned through bitter experience, it was the only practical one. In 1811, the already

starving Astor Expedition lost several precious days in an abortive attempt to reach the Columbia River by following Snake River all the way to its mouth. And in 1834 Captain Bonneville and several men and animals, according to Washington Irving in his historical novel *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville*, starved and labored through waist-deep snow for about ten days in a February crossing of the ridge between Hells Canyon and Imnaha Canyon, because he was unaware of the Indian trail through Burnt River Canyon. And in 1845 the fateful Lost Wagon Train led by Stephen Meek thought to avoid Burnt River Canyon and the Blue Mountains by going straight through the center of the state. Many died and the train still ended up going all the way to the Columbia River via the Deschutes River Canyon.

Burnt River Canyon was a difficult, constricted passageway through which all the early wagon trains were funneled. It is not surprising that it is mentioned in many diaries kept by those who passed through it. Although Narcissa Whitman did not mention the canyon, here fellow traveler, W. H. Gray, had this to say:

“...[O]ur trail being along the sides of the mountain only wide enough for a single animal to pass winding around and along steep precipices and among the rocks which scarcely permits the foot of man or beast to secure a firm foothold, while passing along.”

A couple of years later in 1838, more missionaries came through Baker County. The diaries of Myra Eells and Mary Walker yield these early impressions of the area:

“Aug. 22—Traveled along Burnt River where the Indians attempt to sell us berries.

“Aug. 23—Three horses were taken by the Indians overnight. Camped again on Burnt River. Conners’ squaw is about to give birth. Climbed hills higher than any we have passed at all. They told us we were done with mountains long ago, but if these are not hills I know not what they are.

“Aug. 24—Camped at ‘Lone Tree.’ Indian sent by M. Whitman met us with a letter. This tree stands in the midst of a plain. On both sides are snow-capped mountains.

“Aug. 25—Camped in Grande Ronde Valley. Conners and his wife stayed behind. She gave birth to a daughter before sunset.”

Mention of the Lone Tree, also called Lone Pine, reminds me of another reason why the Oregon Trail through Baker County is so prominent in the history of the trail. As early as 1818, the tree was a well-known landmark for trappers of the Northwest Company, many of them French Canadians, who called it “l’arbre

seul” and used that name to refer to the valley in which the Lone Pine stood. Narcissa Whitman mentioned it in her diary entry of August 26, 1836:

“Came on as far as the Lone Tree. The place called Lone Tree is a beautiful valley in the region of Powder River, in the center of which is a solitary tree quite large, by the side of which travelers usually stop and refresh themselves.”

Narcissa slept under the Lone Pine in a tent which she needed, for she noted that, “the wind blew quite hard & prospect was for a cool night.”

As famous as the Lone Pine was for the early traveler, it was actually seen by just a few of the hundreds of wagon trains that passed through Baker Valley, for it was cut down in 1843. I have heard descendants of Baker County pioneers tell how grandma had seen the tree and knew where it used to stand. But such stories are of doubtful validity, since the first settlers of Baker County arrived almost twenty years after the tree fell to the ground. In this passage from the recollections of Peter Burnett in the March 1904 issue of the *Oregon Historical Quarterly* he describes the demise of the tall pine:

“We passed through some beautiful valleys and encamped on the branch of the Powder River at the Lone Pine. This noble tree stood in the center of a most lovely valley about ten miles from any other timber. It could be seen at a distance of many miles, raising its majestic form above the surrounding plain, and constituted a beautiful landmark for the guidance of the traveler. Many teams had passed on before me, and at intervals, as I drove along, I would raise my head and look at that beautiful green pine.

“At last, on looking up as usual, the tree was gone. I was perplexed for a moment to know whether I was going in the right direction. There was the plain, beaten wagon road before me, and I drove on until I reached the camp just at dark. That brave old pine, which had withstood the storms and snows of centuries had fallen at last by the vandal hands of man. Some of our inconsiderate people had cut it down for fuel, but it was too green to burn. It was a useless and most unfortunate act. Had I been there in time I should have begged those woodsmen to spare that tree.”

I would like to close with my personal view about the proposed six-million-dollar Oregon Trail Monument. The Oregon Trail and the history it represents deserve a monument, and I can think of no better place along its 2000 miles for the monument than right here in Baker County. Done with imagination and an appreciation of the trail’s place in history, the monument would meet enthusiastic acceptance from travelers and would be a boon to the local economy. In response to those who see more practical and pressing needs in our society, I can only say that no matter what present needs a people has at a given point in time, it still cannot afford to neglect the past.

Baker City, Oregon  
1987