

THE 1866 OREGON TRAIL DIARY OF DELILA WAIT

by Gary Dielman

Part I

To the history buff, the Oregon Room of the Baker County Library is as rich in material on Baker County as its mines were in gold. While doing research there recently, I ran across the 1866 Oregon Trail Diary of Delila Brintha Wait. Delila, then twenty-two years old, recorded the memorable events of each day of her three months on the Oregon Trail. The diary is important for Baker County history because it contains what is probably the earliest written account of the settling of Lower Powder River (Keating) Valley.

The fragile, 58-page hand-bound diary is a handwritten copy of the original, which may or may not have survived. Delila's parenthetical additions to the diary indicate that she copied it sometime after 1887. Library employee Pearl Jones procured the diary for the library from Delila's niece Mabel Merwin Nelson shortly before Nelson's death in 1976 at the age of 94. According to Jones, Nelson wanted to make sure her aunt Delila's diary remained in Baker County.

On May 28, 1866, sixty-year-old Isaac Wait and his daughters, Delila and Frances Helen, age 16, began the long, dusty journey to Oregon from Lawrence, Kansas, located a few miles west of Kansas City. They took with them only what they could fit into their single wagon pulled by a team of four mules.

89 Days to Baker County

After eighty-nine days on the trail, the Waits crossed the Snake River into Baker County on Olds Ferry at Farewell Bend. Delila said the ferry "was the largest and best one we have been on. There was three wagons and sixteen head of stock on the boat when we came over." The wagon train stopped for lunch on a hillside in the vicinity of present-day Huntington and then "came into the valley of Burnt River and traveled up it all the afternoon." The troop made camp in the hills near a spring that evening.

Toll roads and bridges in difficult terrain were a way of life on the Oregon Trail. Baker County was no exception, especially in parched Burnt River Canyon, considered by many travelers to be the most difficult stretch of the long trail west. On Sunday, August 26, the second day in Oregon, Delila tells of two toll gates within a few miles. "We started early this morning. Came through a toll gate and soon after crossed Burnt river and came up it to another toll gate and took the right hand road from there."

At this crossroads Delila says that one of the wagons "went the other road that goes through Baker City." By 1886 a number of roads had been opened up through Baker County. The road referred to here probably took off up Dixie

Creek north of Lime about three miles and went to Baker via Mormon Basin or Rye Valley.

In the afternoon of the 26th Delila says the train "had several hills to climb" and then stopped at four o'clock "in a gulch through which were several spring brooks, where there were a lot of packers," indicating this was a popular campsite. The hills are probably the detour from Burnt River, where the Oregon Trail went up Sisley Creek near Weatherby, skirted around the north side of Gold Hill, and then descended Swayze Creek into Durkee Valley in order to avoid a particularly narrow part of Burnt River Canyon.

Route "to Union"

The wagon train got underway on August 27 before sunrise and "traveled through a narrow valley for several miles." Here Delila is no doubt referring to Durkee Valley, at the northwest end of which the emigrants could choose between continuing up Alder Creek to Baker City or turning right up Lawrence and Pritchard Creeks, the original route of the Oregon Trail.

Opting to bypass Baker City, Delila's group "took the road to Union and came into a deep canyon about two miles and stopped for dinner." In the afternoon "the road continued up the canyon for several miles, then took off across the hills."

The next day, August 28, the wagon train descended the hills into the Lower Powder area headed for Union probably via Catherine Creek, rather than taking the traditional route across Virtue Flat to Baker Valley and Ladd Canyon. Delila wrote on this date: "Just three months today since we left Lawrence, Kansas. Came to Powder River, crossed over on a good bridge and stopped for dinner just this side, where there was the finest feed (the teams) have had anywhere since we started. There is a toll house on the other side of the river, and a good sized dwelling on this side at the edge of the bottom which is half mile wide here." The Waits did not know it yet, but they were about to make this valley their new home.

Since by this time the family was short of cash, Isaac Wait decided to stay a week or two to earn money helping a farmer, Pat Comsasky, put up hay about three miles down river at the mouth of Balm Creek. He ignored warnings from "some bachelors" who lived in the large house at the edge of the valley that a delay that late in the year might make crossing the Cascades difficult. His decision, it turned out, meant the end of the trail for the Wait family. In her last dairy entry added years later, Delila wrote this matter-of-fact conclusion to their journey: "When the haying was done, we all went up to the toll house, and spent the winter there, at what is the Pierce place now."

Stayed in Lower Powder

I was curious to know the location of the toll bridge, whose existence was a revelation to me. So I called Jack Wellington, a lifelong resident of the Lower Powder. He helped me use Delila's clues to place the toll bridge at the site of the bridge near Keating. Jack said the old Pierce place was about three miles upriver from the mouth of Balm Creek and near the present-day bridge over the Powder River just south of Keating. Jack had not heard of a toll bridge, but his father told him that stage horses used to be kept at the Pierce place.

If the toll bridge is correctly placed near Keating, then the bachelors' dwelling, which Delila said was "at the edge of the bottom," must have been the beginning of the town of Keating.

It was not luck that led me to seek Jack Wellington's assistance, it was Delila herself. In a note added to the diary years later, she wrote that farmer Comsasky's "cabin or dugout, was in the hill above Wellingtons a little ways." The reference is to Jack's grandparents William and Grace Wellington. Jack's grandfather came over from England as a young man, finally settling down in 1887 at age 37 on a quarter section of land located about 1/4 miles up from the mouth of Balm Creek.

In discussing the diary with Jack, I discovered that his connection to Delila is closer than a brief mention of his grandparents' first place in her diary. In the third part of this three-part series, we'll see how Jack is related to the Waits and the Merwins, another pioneer family to which Delila's diary will introduce us in Part II next week.

Part II

In last week's article we learned from the 1866 Oregon Trail diary of Delila Brintha Wait how she, her father Isaac and sister Frances became some of the very first permanent settlers of Lower Powder Valley. Delila's diary also tells about the Merwins, another pioneer family that accompanied the Waits from Lawrence, Kansas, to Oregon. Several of the Merwins ended up settling in Eastern Oregon.

Delila wrote that Edwin and Susan Merwin left Kansas on May 28, 1866, driving two four-mule teams hitched to two wagons in which rode their children Hervy, Henry, William, Rose, and Marshall. Also riding with the Merwins was Celestia Prudence Wait Merwin, Delila's twenty-year-old sister. Prudence, as she was called, had recently married the Merwin's son Arthur Todd Merwin, age twenty-six, a teamster on the plains. On June 19 the wagon train met up near Fort Kearney, Nebraska, with Arthur who was returning from a hauling trip

west. Prudence left the train and returned to Kansas with Arthur. We'll see in Part III that they, too, emigrated to Baker County two years later.

The Waits and the Merwins shared the experiences of the 2000-mile journey through territory inhabited mainly by Indians and soldiers stationed at forts along the trail to protect travelers. The emigrants were wary of the Indians. Delila tells us that when the train passed an encampment of about fifty Indian lodges in central Nebraska, "the boys got off their steeds to ride in the wagons."

Fortunately Delila's wagon train was not bothered by Indians, but the danger was real. On July 16, Delila wrote of visiting the graves of soldiers near an old fort in eastern Wyoming. Later she added a note saying, "After we got through we heard the men stationed at this Fort were killed by Indians not very long after we passed."

There were other hazards on the Oregon Trail. A couple of incidents that befell these travelers involved mules. Henry Merwin's revolver accidentally went off killing the white mule he was riding. On another occasion one of the boys driving a mule team lost a line. When he climbed out on the tongue to retrieve the line, he slipped and "fell under the wagon, the hind wheel passing over his limbs below the knees, no bones broken, but he was badly bruised," wrote Delila.

The most harrowing experience of the journey began at two o'clock in the morning of June 12, when the party was camped between a dry slough on the Little Blue River in southeastern Nebraska. In the longest entry of the diary, Delila tells how the camp was awakened to "the startling news that the creek was rising fast and we had better get out onto higher ground." By the time they had piled everything into the wagons and hitched the teams, the water was running under the wagons. They drove to a nearby knoll with a big tree on it. The knoll was not even big enough to pitch the tents on, so the wagons were placed with just their tongues on it. The mules and horses standing up to their knees in water were tied to the back of the wagons. The shocked travelers watched the water rise all night and were prepared "to haul the women into the tree if the water got deep enough to float the wagons." The water kept rising until nine o'clock in the morning. Although the women never had to climb the tree, the flood was so severe that the train was unable to move to dry ground until midday of June 14.

After crossing the Snake River in Oregon on August 25, the Waits and the Merwins parted company. As the Waits set up camp by a spring that evening, the Merwins passed by in their two wagons. "And that was," Delila later wrote, "the last time we saw them." Although the diary makes no further mention of the Merwins, we'll see in Part III that some of them made Eastern Oregon their home. The Waits never caught up with the Merwins, because, as reported in Part I, Isaac Wait decided to make some money haying on Lower Powder River.

The entries from the last two weeks of Delila's diary are important, because of the glimpses we get of the Lower Powder area and the people who were there in 1866. There was farmer Pat Comsasky, who lived with his black cat in a dugout about a mile up Balm Creek, where he had a wicker fish trap. And there were his hay hands, John Irwin from John Day and an elderly Mr. Full from Wisconsin. Delila wrote of riding with her sister Frances on mules up Balm Creek to Couster (Kooster) Road to Clover Creek and then up it a couple of miles to a residence "very pleasantly situated in a small valley," where lived a Mr. and Mr. Tucker and their infant daughter Nancy. Delila and Frances ate melons from their large garden. Delila said that the Tuckers "have a good market at the mines for all they can raise."

In 1886 mining in the mountains above Keating was beginning to boom. In her September 11th entry Delila said that Pat Comsasky went up to Hogem (near Sanger), where "there are two families living, Packwoods and Pierces, and a few miners." The reference is probably not to William Packwood, who came to Baker County in 1862 and helped found Auburn, the first town in the eastern half of Oregon.



Original Keating Post Office and Store

By September 11, 1866, the date of the last entry and one of the shortest, the Waits were settled into the routine of the hay camp on Lower Powder River. "I have been washing today and nothing has occurred out of the usual," wrote Delila.

Part III, the last of this three-part series, will relate what happened after 1888 to these two pioneer families of the Lower Powder, the Waits and the Merwins.

Part III

In the first two articles of this series about the 1866 Oregon Trail diary of Delila Wait, we got acquainted with the pioneer families of the Waits and the Merwins. The diary, which Delila began May 28, 1866, when her wagon train left Lawrence, Kansas, abruptly ended on September 11, 1866, a couple of weeks after arrival in Oregon. It tells us nothing of the further fortunes of the Merwins; and of the Waits we learn only that after the haying was done they spent the winter at the toll house and bridge on Lower Powder River near present-day Keating.

My curiosity about what became of these early pioneers led me to several fruitful sources of information.

Baker County Library employee Pearl Jones was my first source. A number of years ago she recorded some oral history of Baker County from Mabel Merwin Nelson, who died in 1976 at age 94. She was the daughter of Arthur Todd Merwin and Celestia Prudence Wait Merwin, Delila's sister. Using genealogical data given to Pearl Jones by Mabel Nelson, plus the 1870 United States census of Baker County, gravestones in Mount Hope Cemetery in Baker, and biographical sketches of Todd Merwin in the vanity publications *An Illustrated History of Baker, Grant, Malheur and Harney Counties* (1902) and *History of Oregon* (1893), I have been able to put together some sketchy information about what happened to the two families after 1866.

A year after arriving in Oregon, Delila Wait, who was born February 26, 1844, at Porter, New York, married Augustus L. Saunders on October 1, 1867, at Gem City, later renamed Sparta, a mining town in the mountains above Keating. Nine months later their first of three children, Laura Rebecka, was born at Gem City. Their other two children, who were born in Keating in 1873 and 1875, did not survive childhood. Delila's husband preceded her in death in 1886.

Delila apparently lived out her life in Baker County. So far I have uncovered no other details about her life. But I did discover by chance just a few days ago that she died at age 67. While I was walking through Mount Hope Cemetery, the name Wait caught my eye. It was on the gravestone of Delila's father, Isaac Wait, born, so the stone says, in Haldermand, Canada West, August 30, 1806 and died October 14, 1881. Carved in the white marble gravestone next to his is "Mrs. D. B. Saunders, born Feb. 26, 1844, died May 2, 1911." The two adjoining graves, which share a common stone, are those of Delila's sister, Prudence, and brother-in-law, Arthur Merwin.

Laura Saunders, Delila's daughter, married Herbert Cranston at Keating in 1888. They had four children: Walter Augustus (1889- ?), Herbert Cecil (1891-?), Mildred Florence (1893-?), and George Archibald (1898-1988). Walter married

Irene Wellington, an aunt of present-day Lower Powder rancher Jack Wellington. Mildred married Wallace Blackburn in Baker in 1916.

According to the United States decennial census of 1870, Delila's father, Isaac Wait, and her sister, Frances, were living at house number 96 in the Powder River post office district. I do not know the location of the house but presume it was in the Lower Powder area. The census gave Isaac's occupation as farmer and said that Frances was born in Michigan and was keeping house for her father. The report also lists Arthur and Prudence Merwin as members of the household in 1870.

Whereas the Waits stopped short of their original destination (western Oregon), the Merwin family kept going. Edwin and Susan Merwin made it to the other side of the Cascades and settled down in Polk County. Genealogical data from Mabel Nelson indicates that besides Arthur at least two other Merwin children ended up in Eastern Oregon. Hervy died at Union about 1887 and William at Baker in 1916.

More is known about Arthur "Todd" Merwin, thanks to the two vanity publications mentioned above. Todd was born near McConnelville, Ohio, on June 24, 1840. When he was twelve, his family moved to Illinois and then to near Lawrence, Kansas, when he was sixteen. Three years later he became a teamster on the plains and eventually part-owner in a train of freight wagons. In Lawrence, Kansas, on April 6, 1866, just before his family left for Oregon, Arthur married Celestia Prudence Wait, who was born at Lockport, New York, on September 14, 1846. Two years later they sold their business and emigrated to Baker County, where they eventually acquired a homestead on Lower Powder River. In the days when the Panhandle area was still part of Union County, Arthur was a (Keating?) school board member for fourteen years and a deputy county assessor of Union County for four years. In 1901 Arthur retired from ranching and the family moved to 2305 Third Street in Baker City, where he became a deputy assessor for Baker County.

Arthur and Prudence had three children, but two died in infancy. The surviving child, Mabel, was born at Keating on October 1, 1881, and lived all 94 years of her life in Baker County. Her longevity was derived from her parents. Arthur died in 1934 also at age 94 and Prudence a year later at age 89.

Thanks to Delila's niece, Mabel Merwin Nelson, who gave her aunt's diary to the Baker County Library shortly before her death in 1976, this early record of Baker County has been preserved to delight generations to come. Since the handwritten copy of the diary is much too fragile to be handled, I am preparing a typewritten copy. It will soon be available for the public to check out at the Baker County Library.

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