

Discovering Gold in Baker County Library's Historic Photo Collection by Gary Dielman

Historic photographs can draw us into the past like Alice through the looking glass. But, like Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, we have to be curious and the photo has to invite that curiosity. One intriguing photograph archived at the Baker County Library shows an emigrant family and its covered wagon and its collection of animals as they passed through Baker City in 1884.

When the trailers passed through Boise, Idaho, in October 1884, the *Boise Democrat* reported, "The wheelers were oxen, succeeded by the donkey mated also with an ox, which in turn was preceded by a horse led by a man. The oxen were no larger than the Burmese cow of traveling menageries. The jack was about the size of a Newfoundland dog. The horse was also diminutive and seemed to be a collection of equine bones articulated for the occasion." The article reported that the group was from Texas and headed for the Willamette Valley.



Covered wagon at SW corner of Main & Auburn, 1884.

Let me draw you further into the photograph. The setting is the southwest corner of what is known today as Old Post Office Square at the intersection of Main and Auburn streets in downtown Baker City. In the far distance is the sagebrush-covered hill that forms the city's southwest skyline. A line of small, frame buildings forms the immediate backdrop. Signboards jutting out over the boardwalk advertise "Singer Sewing Machines" and "Sam Sing Washing & Ironing." Twenty-four local men and boys pose behind the main subjects of the

photograph: two adults, four children, their wagon, and their diverse collection of animals. The photographer had everyone's frozen attention, with the exception of the horse, whose ears have a double image.

The emigrant family is as diverse as its wagon team. A thin, warmly dressed, possibly toothless elderly woman holds the horse's reins. Her expression is at the same time grim and sad. In contrast, front and center in the photograph is a young boy, perhaps eight or nine years old, striking a nonchalant one-legged pose with a hand resting on the donkey's rump. A slightly older boy, with his face obscured by a hat made for a bigger head, stands shyly by the wagon's rear wheel. Seated on the wagon is a bearded old man who holds a whip that appears to be made of willow branch and rawhide. Beside him sits a concerned-looking girl of about six. And behind them, standing in the bed of the wagon, is a younger, tousle-headed boy who looks intently at the camera from under his eyebrows. Presumably the four children are siblings, but are the adults the children's parents or grandparents? If they are grandparents, then where are the parents? I find myself drawn not only into the photograph but also into the lives of these strangers, and I want to learn more about this intriguing slice of time on the Oregon Trail. The *Boise Democrat* reported, "A liberal purse was made up for them by our citizens, and they moved on westward no doubt carrying with them a tolerable fair opinion of Boise City."



*Martin Hazeltine Photography Studio
(Located on SW corner of Main and Auburn Streets)*

What you cannot see in the photograph is the photographer's studio just off the right edge of the photograph, where he had recently set up shop. This photograph was taken by one of the West's most famous early photographers, Martin Mason Hazeltine (1827-1903). Hazeltine wandered the West for several decades, taking photographs from California to Yellowstone Park to Alaska and throughout the Northwest and finally settled down in Baker City in 1884. He died

in Baker City at age seventy-five, after teaching his craft to his daughter Viola Hazeltine Parker, who operated a photography studio in Baker City with her husband Roland well into the 1900s.

Many of the Hazeltine and Parker photographs are represented in the Baker County library's collection, along with about 10,000 other photographs, most of which date from period 1865-1910. The collection had its beginning in 1981, when Neva McCord donated about 2,000 photographs collected by her late father-in-law, O.H.P. McCord, a Baker City businessman. Ten years later, the collection grew by another 2,500 photographs which were bequeathed to the library by Sumpter-area historian Brooks Hawley. Over the years more than 150 other generous donors have added to the collection.

The greatest asset of the library's photograph collection is the visible face it puts on Baker County's early history. The county was established by the Oregon legislature in the fall of 1862 after the previous fall's discovery of gold in the area. Gold miners, merchants, and farmers flooded in during the summer of 1862 boosting the non-Indian population from zero to around five thousand, most of whom resided in a tent city called Auburn, which became the county seat in October of 1862. Before the discovery of gold, what became Baker County, traversed from southeast to northwest by the Oregon Trail, was just a wilderness to be crossed on the way to a promised Eden in the Willamette Valley. Baker City was platted in 1864, and its residents wrested the county seat from Auburn in 1868. The collection's oldest photographs include a few rare ones taken in Baker City in its infancy and in Auburn, which rapidly lost population as the nearby placer mines played out..

Hazeltine's October 1884 covered wagon photograph coincides with a significant milestone in the history of Baker City. That fall a railroad, following the route of the Oregon Trail, quickly supplanted covered wagons as the preferred mode of travel in the continuing cross-country migration. In August of that year, the rails of the Oregon Railway and Navigation Company (OR&N Co.) reached Baker City, and in November, just a mile west of Huntington—a small town in the southeastern corner of Baker County, a few miles west of the famous Farewell Bend of the Snake River on the Oregon Trail—the final spike was driven connecting the OR&N Co. rails coming from the northwest with the Oregon Short Line rails coming from the east. Thus, Baker County and Oregon were for the first time connected by rail all the way to the East Coast. With the advent of cross-country railway travel and shipping, Baker City rapidly developed into the biggest city between Salt Lake City and Portland, earning it the title "Queen of the Inland Empire."

Baker County Library's roots go back to 1900, when a group of wives of prominent professionals and businessmen founded the Alpha Literary Club. Club founders Lulu Eppinger, Edith Flynn, Grace Goodwin, Ida Sage, and Maude Palmer and other club members persuaded the city fathers to allow them to set up a library in city hall. In 1910, the city built a large stone library, which was

largely funded by a \$17,500 grant from philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. In 1970, the library moved into a new home on the west bank of Powder River adjacent to Geiser-Pollman Park. The library's old home, the Carnegie Library Building, has been remodeled as a cultural arts center. In 1983, Baker County Library District was formed and has operated as a public entity with its own tax base under the direction of an elected board of directors since 1985.

The library's photograph collection contains thousands of fascinating images: 2,000 photographs of Baker City, mostly of six blocks of the Main Street business district; 1,000 photographs of Baker County's small towns and ghost towns; 1,100 photographs of about 120 different mines and gold dredges; and thousands of photographs in subject matter areas such as Sumpter Valley Railway, people, nature, organizations, schools, logging, farming, and ranching. A dedicated group of volunteers has worked with the collection for over thirty years.



*Sumpter Valley Dredge No. 1.
It operated from 1913-1924.*

Perhaps the most important component of the library's collection is its images of local gold mines, dredges, and related activities. Especially valuable to researchers are the ten annotated photograph albums bequeathed to the library by Sumpter native and historian the late Brooks Hawley. Many photographs show the three gold dredges that successively chewed up and spat out the bucolic surface of the Sumpter Valley of Hawley's youth, right up to the edge of his parents' ranch. Hawley hated those dredges for turning Sumpter Valley pasture land into long piles of rocks that snake back and forth across the valley floor. On the back of a photograph of Dredge no. 1, Hawley refers to it as "that dredge that tore up Sumpter Valley." In a gloss in an album of dredge photographs, Hawley said of Dredge no. 3, "It didn't ruin as many farms as the last dredge." Summing up his opinion of dredges in the same gloss, he wrote, "There isn't much can be said in their defense." Nevertheless, he diligently collected every dredge photograph he could lay his hands on, pasted them into albums, and told their history in the margins.

Hawley's albums also contain hundreds of annotated photographs of hard rock (quartz) mines in Baker and Grant counties. Those images document the millions of dollars invested in gold mining ventures, mainly during the decades immediately after the coming of the railroad in 1884, which facilitated transport of the heavy machinery necessary to pump out water-filled tunnels, lift ore from deep in the earth, and crush it in huge stamp mills. A photograph of the Mammoth Mine—located high in the Elkhorn Mountains six miles northwest of Sumpter and one of the earliest large-scale hard rock mining operations—illustrates the tremendous amount of necessary infrastructure. In the album margin, Hawley gives some history of the mine. “The Mammoth is the first quartz claim in the Sumpter district being staked out in 1866....[A] 5 stamp mill was built at the Mammoth in 1879....The trestle, center of picture, leading to [the] mill was still standing when I was there in 1960.”



*Mammoth Mine on June 24, 1902.
First quartz mine claim
in the Sumpter District, filed in 1869.*

The Mammoth Mine was typical of mining operations in the Elkhorns that used gravity to move ore from the mine down the mountain slope to a processing mill below. The large structure at the left was the hoist plant, which sat over the mine shaft and contained heavy equipment and cables that lowered men sometimes a thousand feet or more into the mine and then lifted them and ore to the surface. The hoist plant was connected to the processing mill at lower right by a covered

tramway. In winter, the tram cover kept snow off rails along which miners pushed ore cars, which they dumped down the chute at the right end of the tram. The chute directed the ore into the upper part of a multi-level mill, where it was crushed and refined to varying degrees, depending on the sophistication of the mill operation. The refined ore either went to the mine's laboratory for melting into gold bars or, more often, was freighted by wagon to the nearest railroad for shipment to a Tacoma, Washington, refinery four-hundred miles away for final processing. On the opposite slope, at the right, were the mine superintendent's house, boarding house, and various outbuildings.

Piles of cordwood in the foreground were used to power compressors that powered the heavy machinery. Wood burning inside buildings constructed with wooden shingles made fire prevention and fire fighting important aspects of infrastructure protection. At the Mammoth's hoist plant at left, ladders led to rooftop platforms at all levels of the structure. Pre-positioned on platforms on all four roof peaks was a total of nine large barrels of water which workers with buckets could use to douse errant embers that might ignite the roof.

An on-going, nine-year-old scanning project is making many of the library's photographs available to anyone in the world with access to the internet. Using PastPerfect archiving software, 8,000 select photographs may be viewed by visiting the library's website, www.bakerlib.org, and clicking on the "Historic Photos" button. So far volunteers have created over 8,000 records of photographs ; it's anticipated that it will take another decade for volunteers to digitally archive the rest of the collection. With new donated photographs coming in every year, however, there will be no end to the collection's growth.

Staff and volunteers assist researchers and process their requests for copies of photographs. Oregon Public Broadcasting used photographs from the library's collection in its September 2007 documentary "Oregon at War," and its 2009 documentary of the life of Baker City businessman and philanthropist Leo Adler. In the past several years, collection photographs have made up the majority of images used in four publications: Isaac Hiatt's *Thirty-One Years in Baker County*, third edition, Baker County Historical Society (1997); *Baker County Links to the Past*, Baker County Historical Society (2001); *Historic Baker City, Oregon*, in the series "Images of America," Arcadia Publishing Company (2002); and retired geologist Howard Brooks' *A Pictorial History of Gold Mining in the Blue Mountains of Eastern Oregon*, Baker County Historical Society (2007). For almost ten years the *Baker City Herald* published weekly local historic photographs, most of which came from the library's collection.

Besides the Archive Room, in which the photograph collection is securely stored, the library has two other rooms that cater to researchers. The Genealogy Room, with its many genealogical reference volumes, also contains microfilm of local newspapers dating back to 1870, plus microfilm and microfiche readers. The

Oregon Room houses in one convenient location all of the library's books and reference works pertaining to local and Oregon history. All three rooms look out onto scenic Powder River and Geiser-Pollman Park.

When I venture up four-wheel-drive roads high into the Elkhorns in search of mine sites, I become aware of the value of photographs to the history of mining in Eastern Oregon. It is a rare mine site that offers even a hint of the huge structures that once stood there. When mines played out or the market made the operations no longer profitable, machinery was removed and timber salvaged for other uses. Count yourself lucky if you can find the mine entrance, even when the tailings piles show you right where to look. The same value can be found in the library's other photographs of people, buildings, and even whole towns that no longer exist, except in precious old images of the way things were.

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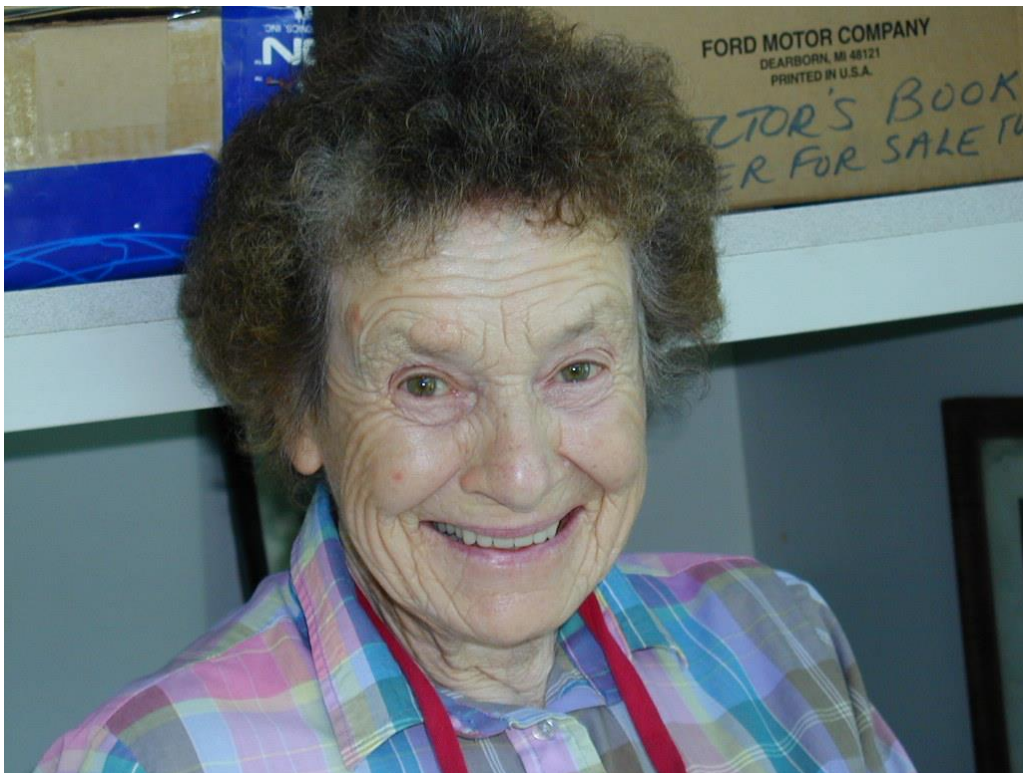
Besides Dorothy York and the author, the following volunteers worked many years cataloging the library's historic photo collection:



Pearl Hayden Jones



Grace Lewis



Laura Hayse



Pearl Jones, Laura Hayse, Linnea Adams, Howard Brooks, at work in the Archive Room of Baker County Library, 2001.



Pearl Jones, Laura Hayse, Linnea Adams, Howard Brooks, at work in the Archive Room of Baker County Library, 2001.