

Baker County Library's Historic Photo Collection  
by  
Gary Dielman

**Things Change**

Millions of years ago Eastern Oregon was part of a volcanic island arc located in the Pacific Ocean thousands of miles from the North American continent. The geologic record has recorded the birth of the arc, its migration, and its collision with the west coast of North America (Idaho). Fast-forward to the 1800's and we find in photographic images laid in a layer of emulsion on glass or other medium--and more recently in layers of digital memory--a record of how things used to be.

Things change. Baker City's downtown used to be a collection of one- and two-story wooden buildings. None of them remain today, replaced by mostly multi-story buildings of brick and stone. And some of those more durable Victorian-era buildings have in turn succumbed to the wrecking ball.



*The Sommer Building on corner and adjacent buildings  
were razed in 1960 to make room for U.S. Bank.  
The site was earlier home of Rust's Opera House and Rust's Brewery.*

The northeast corner of the intersection of Main and Washington streets comes to mind. After a fire in 1898, the wooden buildings of the Pacific Brewery and Rust Opera House were replaced by the four-story brick Sommer Building constructed by merchants Lewis Sommer, the Lee brothers, and Carl Adler (father of Leo and Sanford Adler). Then in 1960 the Sommer Building and a couple of adjacent ones were razed to make way for today's U.S. Bank.

## **Other Changes**

Baker County's mining entrepreneurs built huge hoist houses and mills to bring ore out of the depths of the earth and to process it into gold, silver, and copper. With the rapid decline of hard rock mining in the early 1900's, none of those mining structures remain today to remind us of our mining heritage.

In the late 1950's and early 1960's momentous change came to our eastern Snake River border, as impoundment waters of three high dams inundated wild rapids that had existed for eons, as well as recent man-made developments in the canyon, including farm homesteads, the little towns of Home and Robinette, plus tunnels that facilitated the road and an earlier railway between Huntington and Homestead.

All that's gone now, except in the memories of people who lived in those distant times. And in old photographs, thousands of which are stored in the archives of the Baker County Library, many of which may be seen on its historic photos website. At <http://www.bakerlib.org/> click on the "Historic Photos" button.

And a huge change has come to the website itself. A couple of weeks ago, the number of photos, accessible to viewers all over the world, increased from 2,200 to 6,413.

## **Website Organization**

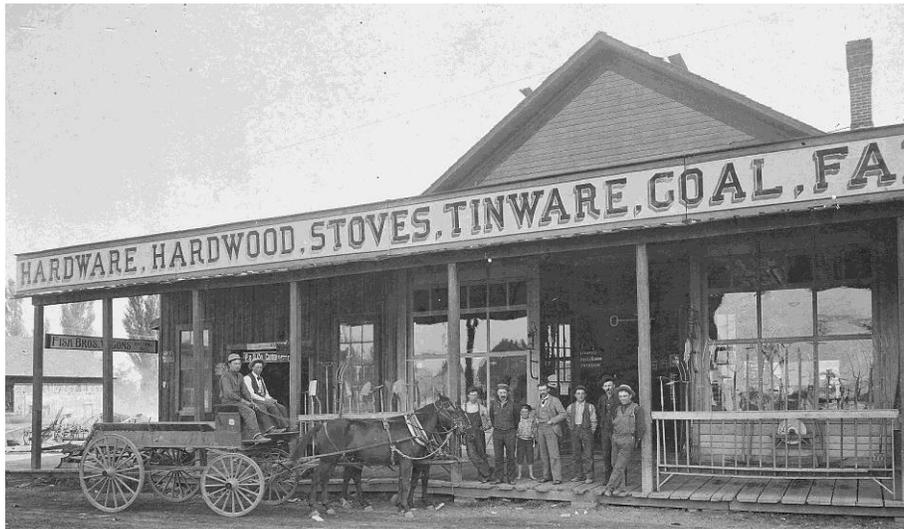
The organization of the website as of May 2009 has also changed. Photographs are divided into six "Galleries": Gallery #1--Baker City (1805 photographs); Gallery #2—Small Towns and Ghost Towns (894); Gallery #3—Mines (1050); Gallery #4—Transportation (mostly Sumpter Valley Railway) (275) and Forest Industry (67); Gallery #5—People (776), Schools (450), Organizations (141), and Churches (86); and Gallery #6—Scenic (324), Agriculture (203), Military (113), Fire Department (92), Sports (43), and Music (10).

## **Downtown Baker City**

Whatever your interest in Baker County history, you can find photos to bring the period back to life. If you want to see what the west side of the 1800 block of Main Street looked like over the years, you can go to the "Table of Contents" page of Gallery #1, Baker City, click at the top of the "Place" column to sort the column numerically and alphabetically, then scroll down until you find "Main, 1800, west" and related addresses. There, for example, you'll find photos of the Bamberger building, constructed in 1888, in the collection of Muegge Drug Store photos donated to the library by Betty Kuhl, who established Betty's Books in the same building previously occupied by the drug store.

Another way to search out photos on the "Table of Contents" page, say photos of the Pacific Brewery, including the fire that destroyed it, would be to click on "Title" to sort that column, then scroll down until you hit the "P's" and Pacific Brewery. If you want to see what the north end of that same block looked like, you could scroll to the "M's" and look for the name McCord, where you'll find photos of the

hardware store of Baker City's first mayor, Syrenus B. McCord. His business stood for many years on that prime piece of real estate at the southeast corner of Main and Broadway.



*Syrenus B. McCord's hardware and farm implement store.  
Located at southeast corner of Main and Washington streets.*

### **Baker County's Mines**

If mining is your area of interest and you want to find photos of the Virtue Mine located at the western edge of Virtue Flat, you could click on "Search this Gallery" located on the home page of Gallery #3, Mines. A search for "Virtue Mine" will yield fourteen photos of one of Baker County's most famous and productive mines. In this new edition of the website, as a convenience in locating mines found in Gallery #3, decimal coordinates are given in addition to the name of the mining district. For example, Columbia Mine's location is given as "Cracker District, 44.8262, 118.2044." You can plug the coordinates into Google Earth (downloadable at [www.googleearth.com](http://www.googleearth.com)) and "fly" right to the mine site.



*Virtue Mine, located at west end of Virtue Flat  
(Virtue District, 44.763102° -117.697014°)*

## Ghost Towns Brought Back to Life

If you want to see what Robinette looked like, formerly located just north of the confluence of Powder and Snake rivers, a search will reveal 21 historic photos, donated recently by Diane Carrithers Carlisle. This town she grew up in no longer exists. Its residents had to move out by 1959, when, as mentioned above, the rising waters behind newly finished Brownlee Dam inundated the town site. The same fate was suffered by the town of Home, formerly located on the Snake River north of Connor Creek. A search in Gallery #2 for "Home, Oregon" will yield a half dozen photos donated by Nancy Bates Fee, whose mother, Hazel Gilbert Bates, worked there in the 1920's. Decimal coordinates are also given for all the ghost towns.



*Robinette, Oregon.  
Flooded by Brownlee Reservoir in 1959.*

### **Dielman's Favorite Photo (kinda)**

Sometimes people ask me what's my favorite photo in the library's historic photo collection. With the recent addition of several thousand photos donated by the Brinton family and *The Record-Courier*, bringing the library's total photo count to well over 12,000, that's an impossible question for me to answer. I have lots of favorites. And I've arbitrarily chosen one to accompany this article.



*This narrow footbridge connected Oregon (far side) with Idaho.*

Located in Gallery #2, Small Towns and Ghost Towns, a photo from 1916 shows an ingeniously-engineered interstate foot bridge connecting the Oregon side of Snake River at Copperfield with the Idaho side. Just wide enough for man and beast, the bridge was 500 feet long. The middle span, which must have been a scary traverse, was 300 feet long and strung high between two 75-foot-tall towers. The photo was donated to the library by the late former Baker City native Doug DeRoest, one of over 100 generous donors to the library's growing collection of historic photos.

© May 3, 2009, Gary Dielman, Baker City, Oregon  
Revised June 2013.