

How the Governor's Secretary Conquered a Notorious Town

by Gary Dielman

Newspapers in Oregon were filled with the most intriguing series of articles, beginning in December 1913, concerning the allegedly scandalous goings-on in the tiny Eastern Oregon town of Copperfield. The following is an account, gleaned from the brittle pages of old newspapers, of how the Governor of Oregon, Oswald West (1873-1960), "cleaned up" lawless little Copperfield.

Copperfield, which we now call Oxbow, was located on the eastern fringe of Baker County, where Pine Creek flows into Snake River at Oxbow Dam. The town came to life around the turn of the century, then in 1907 the population swelled to about 1200, when the first dam and railroad were being built. But by 1914 the town had dwindled to 84 hardy souls. In spite of its miniscule size, Copperfield had three saloons with the major business of the community being liquor and gambling.



Oswald West
Governor of Oregon 1911-1915

You can imagine that the competition between three saloons for so few customers must have been fierce. So Mayor H. A. Stewart, who owned one of the saloons, joined forces with another city councilman, who also owned a saloon, and a couple of other city councilmen, who worked in the saloons. While they voted themselves new liquor licenses, they refused to reissue a license to the owner of the third saloon, Martin Knezevich, claiming he had not been abiding by the liquor laws.

Knezevich, who was reduced to selling soft drinks, got fifty citizens to sign a petition and sent it to Governor West. The petition alleged that Baker County officials, namely Sheriff Ed Rand and District Attorney C. T. Godwin, had turned a deaf ear to their complaints about selling of liquor to minors and illegal gambling conducted by the saloon owners, who were in control of city government.

Being an astute politician in an era when women's suffrage, anti-liquor, and anti-gambling movements held much sway, Governor West directed Sheriff Rand to close the saloons in Copperfield. Sheriff Rand and District Attorney Godwin, who had heard all these complaints before but could get no one to come forward publicly, told the governor they had no hard evidence of law violations by the saloon owners and, therefore, had no legal grounds for closing the saloons. Governor West shot back an ultimatum to Sheriff Rand to close the saloons by Christmas or he would send his secretary, Fern Hobbs, a former resident of Baker, out to accomplish the task.

The governor's threatened action made news around the state. Noting that the *Oregonian* supported the governor in this matter, contrary to its usual practice, the editor of the *Baker Herald* lambasted the Portland newspaper for being "scant in its praise of anything done in this part of the state" and "only too willing to make prominent anything that will stamp this vicinity as a 'freak' or lawless community."

Rand and Godwin told the governor that if he presented them with evidence of illegal conduct on the part of the saloon owners, they would do their duty. That was *not* the reply the governor wanted.



Fern Hobbs (1883-1964)

On January 2, 1914, the headline across the top of the *Morning Democrat* blared out "WEST IS SENDING AN ARMY." Miss Hobbs, accompanied by Colonel B. K. Lawson and five armed members of the Coast Artillery, arrived that afternoon in Copperfield. They went straight to city hall, where the whole population of the town was gathered. Miss Hobbs read to the saloon owners the governor's demands, namely that they close their saloons and resign from the city council, and presented them with resignation papers to sign. On advice of their attorney, James Nichols, a law partner of District Attorney Godwin, the saloon owners refused to either close their saloons or resign from office.

Miss Hobbs promptly left town on the 4:00 p.m. train for Baker, where she spent the night at the Geiser Grand Hotel, before returning to Portland the next day. Upon Miss Hobbs departure, Col. Lawson immediately and without resistance placed the town under martial law, ordered the saloons padlocked, and posted guards at the door of each.

The next day Attorney Nichols obtained from the local circuit judge an injunction against the governor's actions. Anticipating that local authorities might try to interfere, Governor West had instructed Col. Lawson to disregard any local legal maneuvers. Col. Lawson, hearing that he was about to be served papers and fearing that he would be arrested if he did not abide by the injunction, wired the governor for more troops. Also, his fears were heightened by an erroneous report by an *Oregonian* reporter that Sheriff Rand was putting together a posse to retake the town. When Rand heard the rumor, he disavowed it saying he'd not risk one life over the matter.



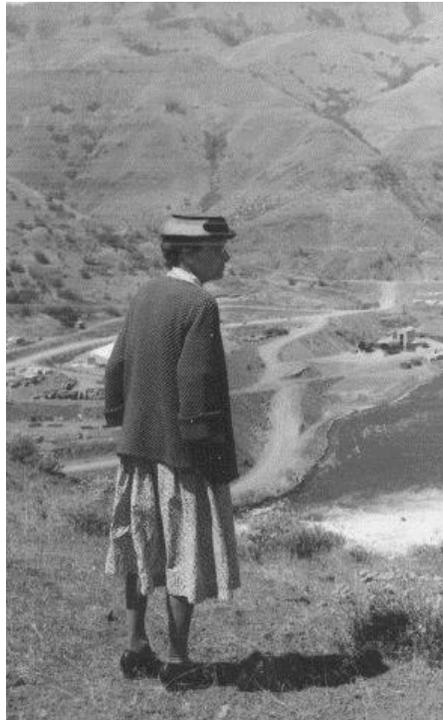
Copperfield, Oregon, ca. 1908
Snake River-Pine Creek Confluence at Left Center

The next day more troops arrived bringing the total to twenty. They set about confiscating 10,000 pounds of liquor, beer, gambling devices, and a couple of racy pictures, which they loaded onto the train for transport to Baker, where the gambling devices were ultimately burned by the troops at the city dump.

In Huntington there was a powwow between Sheriff Rand and an attorney from Portland representing Governor West, which resulted in all but four members of the militia being withdrawn from Copperfield by January 8th. Things now settled down for the next phase, a court hearing scheduled on the injunction. On January 19th, after a two-day trial, Circuit Judge Anderson refused to uphold the injunction, ruling that the courts may not interfere with the governor's right to declare martial law. But he left the

door open for the plaintiffs to sue the governor, Miss Hobbs, and Col. Lawson, if they unlawfully suffered damages.

The saloon owners promptly filed suit against West, Hobbs, and Lawson asking for \$8,000 in damages. On February 24th, the plaintiffs lost again and had to pay the cost of trial to boot. In April the saloon owners were back in court, this time as defendants, after a Baker County grand jury indicted them for selling liquor to minors. Ex-mayor H. A. Stewart was tried first. It took the jury just five minutes to acquit. The other defendants were never tried.



*Fern Hobbs revisited Copperfield in June 1959.
Copperfield site is just off the right side of the photo.
Notice turbulent water coming out of the Oxbow tunnel.*

A couple of footnotes: In June 1914, while repairing a fence near Copperfield, Stewart was shot through the body by an unknown rifleman. Miraculously he survived. On the lighter side, during the height of Copperfield's notoriety, a song with this title was being sung in Portland theaters: "I Could Live Forever in Copperfield With a Girl Like You." Most of what was left of the town burned to the ground in August 1915.

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Another version of the foregoing article, including more photos, may be found in the online *Oregon Encyclopedia* located at this website:

http://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/entry/view/hobbs_fern_1883_1964/