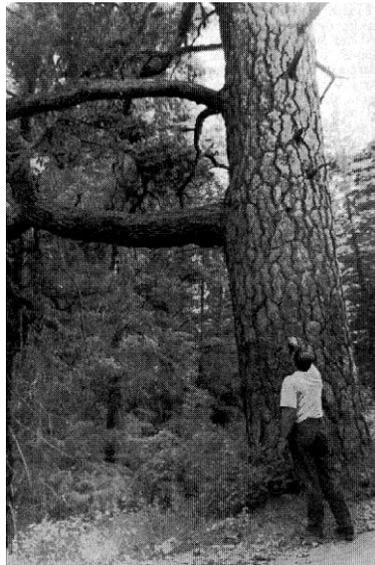


## The Dixie Creek Hanging Tree by Gary Dielman

"If it wasn't a hanging tree, it should have been." I think anyone who has seen the huge Ponderosa pine tree at the side of the road up Dixie Creek between Rye Valley and Mormon Basin has probably said or thought similar words upon passing the tree. Maynard Drawson of Salem, founder of Oregon's Heritage Tree Program, would like to see the tree designated a Heritage Tree. He believes it to be the only remaining hanging tree in Oregon and, therefore, especially worthy of the designation.

According to articles written in the *Baker City Herald* and *The Record-Courier* about a visit Drawson made to the Dixie Creek tree in the summer of 1994, the tree's reputation as a hanging tree comes from a story the late Harlan Langley, a long-time resident of the area, heard from his grandfather. According to the story, a man was hanged on the tree in the late 1860's or early 1870's for stealing gold from a man's sluice box and also taking the man's horse.



Reputed Hanging Tree on Dixie Creek  
Between Rye Valley and Mormon Basin

Several years ago, Dean Brickey, who had accompanied Drawson on his visit to the alleged hanging tree, asked me if I would do some research to see if there was any confirmation of Langley's grandfather's story. After looking in my own files and asking around among those most acquainted with Baker County's history, I turned up no other sources or even leads.

Recently Brickey, managing editor of *The Record-Courier*, has asked the Baker County Board of Commissioners to nominate the Dixie Creek tree for addition to the Oregon Heritage Tree list. Feeling that additional documentation of the tree's history would be helpful, I got inspired to look into the matter again to see what I could find.

Court records are among the very best of sources. However, the only legal hanging in Baker County was the execution of Pleasant Armstrong on the courthouse grounds in 1904. The hanging story related by Langley's grandfather would have been an illegal lynching by a group of vigilantes.

Newspapers are another excellent source of documentation but, unfortunately, prove not to be of help in learning about the Dixie Creek tree. During the 1860's Baker County did not have a newspaper. It wasn't until May 1870 that the *Bedrock Democrat*, a weekly, published its first edition. And not every edition of the *Bedrock Democrat* published in the 1870's survived to our present day. Over the years, I and other Baker County history buffs have perused probably all of those issues without finding a story of the hanging. Perhaps there was an article in one of the many missing issues.

Another potential source is books written by contemporaries of the 1860's and 1870's. With one major exception, I believe this source consists almost solely of diaries and memoirs of Oregon Trail experiences. I have read all of the many books of that sort in the Oregon Room of the Baker County Library, none of which contains, as far as I can remember, anything about the Dixie Creek tree. That's not to say that the hanging is not recounted in some of the many sources of this sort not in our local library.

In addition to diaries and memoirs is Isaac Hiatt's *Thirty-one Years in Baker County: A History of the County from 1861 to 1893*. This is the only general history book that covers the time of the hanging. In addition, it was written by someone who lived here during those years. If any contemporary account could be expected to mention the Dixie Creek tree, this is it.

While Hiatt does not mention the Dixie Creek tree, he was very much interested in hangings. He tells of three hangings that took place in the first years after the 1861 discovery of gold in Baker County. In 1862 a Frenchman was lynched at Auburn for poisoning his two mining partners resulting in the death of one of them. Also that year a Spaniard, who had stabbed to death two men apparently over a card game, was taken by an angry mob from the jail, dragged through the street by his neck, and then strung up from a tree, probably already dead. In 1864 Boggs Greenwood, who had shot to death a man at the tollgate on the Burnt River Road, was hunted down by vigilantes and hanged from a juniper tree near Straw Ranch on Alder Creek southeast of Baker City.

It wasn't for lack of interest in the Rye Valley/Mormon Basin area that Hiatt does not mention the Dixie Creek tree. The handy index in the revised edition of Hiatt's book, published in 1997 by the Baker County Historical Society, shows that Mormon Basin is mentioned on seven pages and Rye Valley on eight pages.

In fact, Hiatt has sections specifically devoted to each of these areas of the county. Hiatt recounts the 1867 story of a family named Scott. While returning in a wagon from Rye Valley to their home on Burnt River, Mr. and Mrs. Scott and children were ambushed by Indians. With Mr. and Mrs. Scott both mortally wounded, Mrs. Scott still managed to out-race the Indians bringing her children to safety on Burnt River. That

same year, according to Hiatt, three white men were killed by Indians in the Mormon Basin area in three different incidents.

In spite of Hiatt's great interest in hangings, Mormon Basin, and Rye Valley, his work remains silent about a hanging in those areas. So, does that mean that the Dixie Creek tree never saw a hanging? No, it just means that I have come up empty again in my search for further documentation of the Dixie Creek tree's story. Perhaps a reader of this article will provide the missing proof.

As a footnote, it's worth mentioning that Pearl Jones remembers the late Jim Evans, fellow Baker County historian, telling her that he had researched the hanging and was planning on writing it up but never did. My guess is that he found no convincing evidence.

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