

Eastern Oregon before the Oregon Trail: The First White men in Oregon*

by
Gary Dielman

Last time I spoke to you, I brought lots of photos from the McCord Collection. This time I have no photos, but instead will paint a mental picture of this area before white men arrived. First we must use an eraser on the present picture. Erase the towns, the farms houses and outbuildings, the asphalt and dirt roads, and with them all the vehicles and every other modern convenience. And let's not forget to take out all the dams, so that the rivers once again run wild and salmon again spawn in the upper reaches of Powder River above Sumpter.

Now that we have erased all evidence of modern civilization, let's look at our new picture of Baker Valley beginning in the foothills of the northwest corner on Pilcher Creek where, until a few moments ago, there was a dam and reservoir. Now it is restored to a large oblong grass-covered meadow with a little creek flowing thru it. It's summer time and although down in the valley it is hot, up here in the meadow it is cooler and the water runs fresher and there are camas roots in the meadow and huckleberries to gather on the surrounding slopes. And of course the deer and elk are nearby. That's probably why there is a small band of Indians camped here and why they have been coming here to spend the warm part of the year for thousands and thousands of years. An archeological dig done before the reservoir flooded the meadow discovered evidence showing human habitation going back 10,000 years.

At the other end of Baker Valley up on Dooley Mountain an Indian has found himself a piece of obsidian on which he is chipping away with the point of a deer's antler fashioning an arrowhead. I don't know the Indian personally or when he made the arrowhead, but I do know that he sat there on Dooley Mountain and made it, because I found it a couple of years ago in a saddle at the top of the mountain that is covered with the obsidian chippings or lithic litter, as the archeologists call it.

Over in the foothills northeast of the valley at Medical Springs, some Indians are sitting in a teepee erected directly over the hot spring having a physically and spiritually cleansing sauna. The Indians continued using the springs for quite a while after the white men came.

Down in Baker Valley itself, where the town of Baker will later stand, there is nothing but grass and a willow-lined river that is only a couple of feet deep. The river has a significantly different course. It comes out of the narrow pass at the south end, but when it gets to Spring Garden hill, what the old timers call old reservoir hill, it bends sharply to the east coursing to just below the present site of Fireside Inn. From there it sweeps back northwest to the Main and D street intersection and then due north. This, then, is Baker Valley as it was before the first white men ventured into the area.

*Speech to Baker County Historical Society

Does anyone know the date when the first white men set foot in Baker valley?
Before I divulge the exact date, let's enlarge the area.

The first white men to see Oregon were on a Spanish ship captained by Ferrelo. In 1543, his ship sailed as far north as the 42nd parallel, where the sailors caught a glimpse of the southern Oregon coast before being driving back south by a storm. It was another 25 years, 1577, before Sir Francis Drake, the most dreaded pirate of his time, sailed up the Oregon and Washington coast to Vancouver Island.

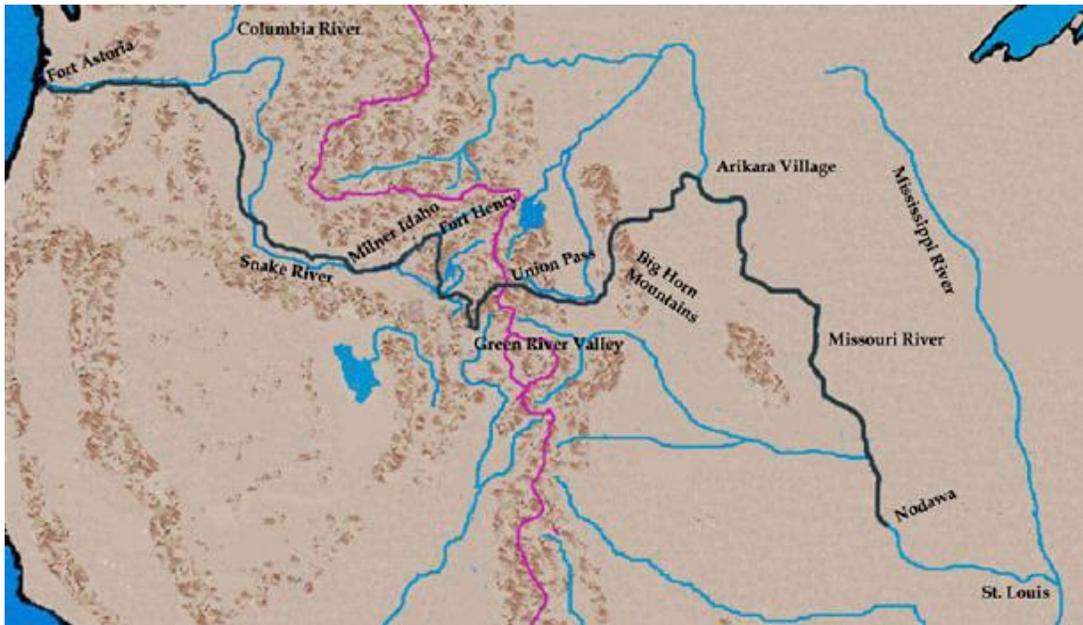
Other explorers sailed off the Oregon coast trading trinkets to the coast tribes for furs. But two centuries passed before the American Robert Gray in the ship *Columbia* crossed the bar of the legendary River of the West and ventured inland in the year 1792. Later that same year the Englishman Broughton rowed up the Columbia as far as the mouth of Sandy River east of Portland naming Mount Saint Helens and Mount Hood along the way. The next year, 1793, the white man's incursion into the vast area west of the Rocky Mountains took a quantum leap, when Sir Alexander McKenzie of the Northwest Company, rival of the great Hudson's Bay Company, with a contingent of ten men crossed the Canadian Rockies, descended the Fraser and Bella Coola rivers arriving at the Pacific Ocean on July 22, 1793, thus becoming the first white men to cross the North American continent. McKenzie was knighted for his efforts.

Thanks to the far-sightedness of President Jefferson, the next crossing of the continent was made by Americans. Lewis and Clark left St. Louis in the spring of 1804. Lewis and Clark and their troop of about 50, including Sacajawea and her baby born on the way, crossed northern Idaho and descended Snake River sighting the Blue Mountains to the south on October 15, 1805. Although Lewis and Clark descended the Columbia to its mouth and spent the winter in the Astoria area, they did not see much of Oregon. When they left, they retraced their steps not venturing south of the Columbia into our area.

Now we are getting closer to the answer to my earlier question. The third crossing of the continent was lead by Wilson Price Hunt, who had been retained by America's richest man, John Jacob Astor, to go overland to the mouth of the Columbia. There Hunt was to meet up with the ship *Tonquin*, which Astor was sending around Cape Horn to set up a fur trading post. Hunt and his party of 60 experienced mountain men left St. Louis in September 1810 and went up the Missouri River until it froze over in November. They wintered in the Dakota area. In April 1811, they got underway, joined by an interpreter recruited at St. Louis named Pierre Dorion and his Indian wife, known only as Madame Dorion, and their 5-year-old and 2-year old sons. Hunt feared it would be a difficult trip for a woman and two children, but Pierre Dorion was the only interpreter available and his services were vital to the success of the crossing. To complicate matters, Madame Dorion was pregnant with a third child.

After making it across the Rocky Mountains they came into the headwaters of the Snake River in eastern Idaho and made the biggest blunder of the expedition. Being

more adapted to boats than horses or walking, they took time to make canoes as soon as the Snake was deep enough to float them. But as the river channel narrowed in the basalt canyon in southern Idaho, the rapids dashed their canoes and they lost one man to drowning. At this point they split into three parties, one party under Crooks went down the south side of the Snake, another went north through northern Idaho, and the third under Hunt went along the north bank of the Snake. The party that went north, finally connecting up with Lewis and Clark's route, made it to the mouth of the Columbia first. The others had a harder time of it. Southern Idaho was dry and devoid of game. By the time they reached Baker County and the mouth of Burnt River, they were starving.



Wilson Price Hunt Expedition, 1810-1811

Crooks party, on the west bank of the Snake, set foot in Baker County about December 1, 1811. They proceeded down the Snake into Hells Canyon but had to turn back, because the area was impassable. Somewhere between Hell's Canyon and the mouth of Burnt River, they encountered Hunt and his party on the Idaho side of Snake River. Upon learning that the way north was no good, they retraced their steps to what we call Farewell Bend today. From there they went up Burnt River, over the ridge to Powder River Valley, and thence to North Powder and out of Baker County.

In 1810 trapper Peter Skene Ogden joined the Northwest Company at Ile-a-la-Crosse in Canada. In 1821 he joined the Hudson's Bay Co., when that fur business absorbed the Northwest Co. In 1825 he was sent to the northwest to be head of trapping in Snake River country with his base at Fort Nez Perce at the mouth of the Walla Walla River. His immediate superior was Dr. McLoughlin at Fort Vancouver. Ogden led several trapping expeditions through this area while he was the chief factor, the main expeditions taking place in the winters of 1825-26, 1826-27, and 1828-29.

Hudson's Bay Co. knew that someday it would have to relinquish control over the area south of the Columbia to the United States. Therefore it was the company's policy to trap the beaver to extinction. "If properly managed no question exists that it would yield handsome profits as we have convincing proof that the country is a rich preserve of beaver and which for political reasons we should endeavor to destroy as fast as possible. If the country becomes exhausted in fur bearing animals they can have no inducement to proceed thither."

When Ogden got back from his first Snake River expedition in November 1825, Dr. McLoughlin sent him to meet up with McDonald up the Deschutes River and trap the interior of Oregon. But when Ogden found McDonald, the latter did not have a guide. Not willing to trap in the area without a guide, they and their 100 trappers headed due east toward Snake River. They trapped as they went. But it was the dead of winter. So, by the time they were in the John Day River area, they were low on food, down to one meal every other day.

The snow was as deep as six feet in the mountains. The frozen ground was very hard on the horses. They killed one horse for food whose "hoof was entirely worn away and only a raw stump" remained. On February 3, 1826, Ogden wrote in his journal, "As far as the eye can reach, nothing but lofty mountains, a more gloomy country I never saw; too (sic) horses killed for food today." February 4: "My Snake (Indian) guide brought in 4 sheep. He says this is Burnt River. February 5: "Course E. NE., crossed river three times and found the ice sufficiently strong to bear our horses. One of the men detected this day stealing a beaver out of another man's trap; as starvation was the cause of this, he was pardoned on condition of promising not to do it again." February 10: "followed the banks of Burnt River s. se. 10 miles. One horse killed. Nearly every bone in his body broken. Two of the men could not advance from weakness. We have been on short allowance almost too long and resemble so many skeletons; one trap this day gave us 14 beaver." February 11: "Crossed Burnt River within 3 miles of its discharge into Snake River or south branch of Columbia. It has given us 54 beaver and 6 Otter."

Ogden's usual custom was to leave Fort Nez Perce in September by the trail leading up the Walla Walla River as far as the forks of that stream, five miles above Milton Freewater, then cross the Blue Mountain range by what has become the Toll Gate road to the lower end of the Grande Ronde Valley at Summerville, where they used to cut the lodge or tepee poles for the season. Thence they passed through Grande Ronde Valley and over the divide to the Powder River usually making camp for the night at a large spring, called by them a fountain, now quite certainly located about five miles from this city and appropriately called Ogden's fountain. From here they traveled by the regular road to Snake River at Huntington. It was along in Baker Valley that Ogden would begin to divide his party into detachments, sending them in different directions upon different streams with instructions to meet again at a certain place and date. Rarely were the appointments missed. The whole party

would return to Fort Nez Perce again in June or July. In the summer of 1829 Ogden turned over the Snake country brigade to John Work.

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