

Baker County's Worst Tragedy

by
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The funeral cortege, the largest ever seen in Baker City, stretched from the north end of downtown Main Street all the way to Mount Hope Cemetery. The seven caskets, borne on a double-decker carriage in place of a hearse, were draped with wreathes and flowers. Immediately in front was a carriage of clergy preceded by a large contingent of the Benevolent Order of the Woodmen of the World carrying floral tributes. And at the head of the whole procession was a carriage containing Mayor C. M. Kellogg and Circuit Court Judge M. L. Olmstead. Behind the caskets followed carriage after carriage bearing citizens of the town and surrounding area. The flag above City Hall flew at half staff and all businesses were closed from 1:30-3:00 p.m.



French Family Grave Marker
Mt. Hope Cemetery in Baker City

Six days earlier, June 15, 1896, farmer Klinefelter, who lived on Goodrich Creek north of Pochahontas, was awakened at 11 p.m. by a distant rumble. Instinctively sensing the source of the sound, he quickly aroused his family and they fled just as rushing, churning waters inundated their house. It didn't take an investigation for Klinefelter to surmise what had happened. Goodrich Dam at the source of Goodrich Creek below Elkhorn Peak had undoubtedly burst.

Klinefelter ran to the Chambers flour mill and home a mile downstream to check on that family, which to his relief the torrent had spared. Thinking next of the French family, who lived across the creek, they rushed to the edge of the swollen creek and peered across into the darkness. They could see nothing of the house and outbuildings nor any sign of the members of the French family. Owing to darkness, a search for the family that night turned up nothing.

Clark Lee French, age 36, and his wife, Laura, age 32, had come to Baker County via Iowa, Colorado, and Wyoming. They lived on a farm on Goodrich Creek with their five children: eleven-year-old Maud, nine-year-old Mary, seven-year-old Carl, five-year-old Grace, and one-year-old Jennie. They had no relatives in this part of the country.



Detail of French Family Grave Marker
(Goodrich Reservoir is mistakenly engraved as “Guthridge”
and as being on Pine Creek rather than Goodrich Creek)

During the night, word of the missing French family spread. The next morning people from all around flocked to the French farm to search for the family, of whom there was still no sign. Included among the searchers were twenty members of the Queen City Camp of the Woodmen of the World, a benevolent order to which Clark French belonged. Hundreds showed up just to view the devastation: crops wiped out, large trees uprooted, boulders strewn across

fields, and bridges and fences washed away. Of the French farm the only recognizable remainder was the foundation of the chimney.

The first body found was that of infant Jennie, hung up in driftwood not fifty yards from the house. Next, not far away, was another girl's body; then a short distance further downstream Laura French and two of her daughters lodged against a big stump. A much wider search was necessary to find the last two bodies. Swept along by the rushing torrent, father and son were finally located almost two miles below their farm. Clark French's body, stripped clean of clothing, hung draped across a fence with the boy's body not fifty yards away. All bodies, except the infant's, were badly bruised with night clothing in tatters. The Chambers' home became a make-shift morgue, where the bodies of the seven victims, wrapped in sheets, were laid side by side. Later that day they were transported in caskets to Baker City by the McKay-Eppinger Furniture and Funeral Company.



Detail of French Family Grave Marker

Goodrich Reservoir, originally a small natural lake carved out by glaciers during several ice ages that reached into Oregon, was augmented by an earthen dam constructed on top of the old terminal moraine in the early 1860s. Below the dam the water from Goodrich Creek was diverted into the Auburn Ditch constructed to carry water to the water-poor area around the gold mining camp of Auburn several mines to the south. During the dry months of summer and fall, the sixty-

five acres of reservoir water fed the sluice boxes of the placer mines at Auburn, eastern Oregon's first gold-fever boomtown. In the spring of 1896, due to an unusually heavy snowfall, the dam was fuller than usual. A five-hour round-trip to the reservoir confirmed everyone's suspicion: the head gate and a large portion of the dam were missing.

With the failure of the dam at Goodrich Reservoir, farmers living below nearby Pine Creek Reservoir feared that dam might be structurally unsound, a possible disaster ready to happen. Superintendent of the reservoir, Samuel B. Baisley, before heading out to inspect that dam, speculated that Goodrich Dam may have been blown up. Upon returning from inspecting the Pine Creek Dam, Baisley told farmers he was confident the dam was perfectly safe, but he would have a man watch the dam as a precaution. One of the purported owners of the dam, Zera Snow, owner of the Nelson Mining Company, disavowed any ownership in the dam and any liability for damages if it should break.

Leaving carriages lining every lane of Mount Hope Cemetery, mourners crowded around the gravesite. Following a dignified service conducted by Woodmen of the World and clergy, the seven coffins were lowered into a common grave. Today the grave, located in the northeast corner of the cemetery, is marked by a traditional tall white marble Woodsman of the World stone. Symbolically carved in the shape of a tree trunk with cut off branches, it stands as a lasting memorial to the seven members of the French family, victims of Baker County's worst tragedy.

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