

Lone Pine Valley  
by  
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A sagebrush-covered hill with soft, rounded contours rises 800 feet above the southwest end of Baker Valley forming a natural boundary between Baker City, Oregon, and the forested lower slopes of the Elkhorn Mountains. The hill extends from the south end of town trending northwest a couple of miles to the west side, where it peters out at Washington Gulch. Dotted its slopes are occasional pine and juniper trees so thinly spaced they lend little green to the hill's barren, parched-brown appearance.

However, when I was growing up in the shadow of this hill, one tree, a Ponderosa pine, literally stood out from all the rest. Not that it was so large or green—it was a tree of modest height and breadth—but prominent due to its location close to the hill's summit right above the municipal golf course. As seen from town, it was the only tree on the crest of the hill silhouetted against the sky, peerless in its lofty location. It was known as the "lone pine."



*The lone pine is just a little bump on the crest of the hill  
in this early 1950's parade photo.*

As a child living in the North Baker, I had no up-close contact with the tree, except on one vividly remembered occasion near the end of World War II. With my father in the South Pacific, my maternal grandparents in Kansas sold almost everything they owned and drove out west to Baker City to be of assistance to my mother, a working mom with two young children. Accompanying my grandparents was my uncle Kenny, who, being just two years older than I, was a great playmate. The three of them lived in South Baker, where the hill was literally just out their backyard. One summer day in 1945, Kenny, a couple of other kids from the neighborhood, and I hiked straight up the hill to the lone pine. For little kids it was a hard, sweaty climb, one taken by many Baker City kids, a kind of rite of passage. The tree had status. It was a neat tree.



*Lone pine in 1945  
(Photo by nine-year old George Gildersleeve)*

The reader may have noticed that I write of the lone pine in the past tense. In the early 1960's, when I was married, a father myself, and a graduate student at the University of Iowa, I read with sadness in my hometown newspaper that some kids had maliciously set fire to the tree. Then, after the tree died, or perhaps it was still not dead—I can't remember—someone chopped it down. It's been over forty years since its demise, but I still miss that tree. Several years ago I climbed the hill again to the spot where I thought the tree had stood. And there it was, a charred, limbless log of slim diameter lying on the ground near its stump. Kids no doubt still make that climb up the hill, but without reaching the lone pine as the goal, it can't be quite the same.

As curator of Baker County Library's historic photo collection for the past twenty-five years, I often come across old black and white photos in which the hill south of town forms a faint backdrop to downtown buildings and events on Main Street. For years I looked in vain for a photo that had even the faintest hint of my childhood friend on the hill. Then recently there, in the background above Baker

City Hall in a photo from around 1890, I perceived an almost imperceptible bump on the crest of the hill. It was my lone pine. Later I discovered a close-up photo taken from above the long pine on page 15 of Loy Wisdom's book *Memories: Ninety Years of Baker City*.



*Trunk of the lone pine still lying where it fell after being burned and then chopped down by vandals in the 1960's.*

As a child I did not know that there was another, infinitely more famous lone pine, the one for which Lone Pine Valley was named. (Today the valley has two other names: Powder River Valley and Baker Valley. Unfortunately the famous Lone Pine suffered the same fate as the lone pine on the hill south of Baker City.

### *L'arbre seul*, the Original Lone Pine

In the years, perhaps centuries, before Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery ever set foot in the Pacific Northwest, a large tree, probably a Ponderosa pine, visible from a considerable distance, towered above the lowly sagebrush, grasses, and willows on the east side of our valley. Being the only large tree it was dubbed *l'arbre seul*, "the lone tree," by the French-speaking voyageurs who trapped beaver in this area beginning around 1811. In those days Lone Tree Valley was for trappers, and for Native Americans as well, a reference mark whenever one gave directions about where to meet or what to pass through when traveling between the Snake and Columbia rivers.

The Great Migration to Oregon Country began in 1843. Those first emigrants had heard of the Lone Pine. One member of the first wagon train to enter Oregon had heard of the Lone Pine and sure enough spied it from Flagstaff Hill. But as he drove his wagon across the floor of Lone Pine Valley looked up and

the tree was gone. Members of his wagon company had chopped down the valley's namesake.

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