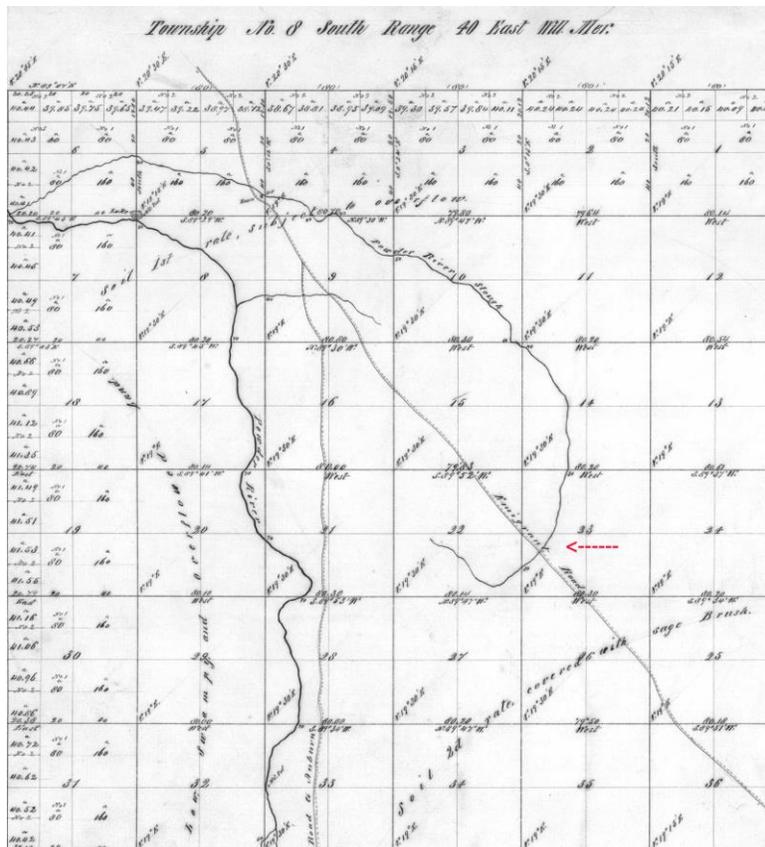


THE LONE PINE OF THE OREGON TRAIL: Where was it?

by Gary Dielman

During our annual Miners Jubilee celebration is a good time to reflect a little on the trail that brought many of the miners and their hangers-on to our part of the world. There's no more dramatic example of the powerful link between gold mining and the Oregon Trail in Baker County than the collocation of the National Oregon Trail Interpretive Center (1991) and historic Flagstaff Mine (1894) on top of Flagstaff Hill at the eastern edge of Baker Valley.

For decades the Oregon Trail led explorers, mountain men, and emigrants through Eastern Oregon until finally, in 1861, the discovery of gold provided the catalyst for settlement of till-then passed-over territory. A once-prominent feature of the trail that's missing today is the Lone Pine, and it's been missing since the first wagon train trailed through Baker County.



Government Surveyor Map of 1864.

Most likely site of Lone Pine is about six miles NE of Baker City, where Emigrant Road crossed Powder River (Baldock) Slough. See red arrow.

For many, many years--perhaps centuries--the Lone Pine, or *l'arbre seul* as it was called by French-Canadian trappers, was a living marker along the trail through Baker Valley. Without a doubt, the Lone Pine would today be the most revered landmark on the Oregon Trail, if, on September 28, 1843, some "inconsiderate emigrant axe" wielded by migrants in the first wagon train to travel the Oregon Trail had not felled the famous pine.

The preceding year Medorem Crawford, in his journal entry of August 8, 1842, described the scene that foot and horse travelers observed upon reaching the crest of the hills south of Virtue Flat:

We at last found the top of the mountain. At a distance we could see what we supposed to be the Blue mountains and they struck us with terror. Their lofty peaks seemed a resting place for the clouds. Below us was a large plain and at some distance we could discover a tree which we at once recognized as "the lone tree" of which we had before heard. We made all possible speed and at 7 o'clock the advance party arrived at the Tree nearly an hour before the cattle. The Tree is a large Pine stand[ing] in the midst of an immense plain entirely alone. It presented a truly singular appearance and I believe is respected by every traveler through this almost Treeless Country.

Obviously not every traveler respected the Lone Pine, for a year later it was chopped down and within five years the Lone Pine stump, wrote Riley Root in his journal on August 14, 1848, "[was] nearly obliterated by fires set to it by emigrants." And by then there was nothing at all left of the rest of the Lone Pine, for, Root noted, "No wood at this place to be obtained for cooking."

Several years ago, the Oregon Department of Transportation erected a historical marker commemorating the Lone Pine, which I designed as a representative of the Baker County Historical Society, on Highway 86 as it winds its way up the hill on the east side of Baker Valley.

But exactly where in Baker Valley the Lone Pine once stood was a question I couldn't answer. Many people would like to drive to that spot and imagine in their mind's eye what the scene at this popular campsite was like for Native Americans, trappers, explorers like Peter Skene Ogden and Captain Bonneville, and early missionaries like Marcus and Narcissus Whitman. We don't know exactly and probably never will. But I think we can get pretty close by reading the many journals kept by travelers of the Oregon Trail or Emigrant Road, as they called it.

The very earliest journals unfortunately give only vague accounts of the tree's location, such as Narcissa Whitman's journal entry of August 26, 1836. "The place called Lone Tree is a beautiful valley in the region of Powder river, in the centre of which is a solitary tree quite large, by the side of which travelers usually stop & refresh themselves." And then there's Thomas J. Farnham's even less helpful September 19, 1839, journal entry. "Cooked dinner at L'Arbor Seul, a lonely pine in an extensive plain."



Narcissa Whitman (1808-1847)

Other journals indicate that the Lone Pine was located at the first water encountered upon entering Baker Valley. Captain John Charles Fremont, whose military expedition passed through the valley in October of 1843, discovered the fate of the Lone Pine just a couple of weeks after it was felled.

October 15. ...From the dividing grounds [hills south of Virtue Flat] we descended by a mountain road to Powder river, on an old bed of which we encamped....From the heights we had looked in vain for a well-known landmark on Powder river, which had been described to me by Mr. Payette as l'arbre seul, (the lone tree;) and, on arriving at the river, we found a fine tall pine stretched on the ground, which had been felled by some inconsiderate emigrant axe. It had been a beacon on the road for many years past.

Fremont's journal does not provide enough detail to locate the Lone Pine. But later travelers began keeping more detailed records of their journey. They usually recorded the number of miles traveled in a day or between significant landmarks such as water crossings. As they traversed Baker Valley, many of the emigrants noted in their journals several such landmarks. Representative of the journals is that of Robert H. Renshaw, who reached Baker Valley in August 1851 and camped at the same site as Fremont.

Thursday 21 Left the waters of Burnt River this morning, and traveled about nine miles to the far edge of a flat [Virtue Flat], and nooned. No water, but plenty of grass. From thence we descended a long slant of hill to [till] we came into a beautiful bottom of land. We traveled down the bottom 3 or 4 miles to we came to water in holes in the bed of a creek.

Friday 22 Left the Seap spring early this morning and traveled to Powder River, a distance of ten miles and nooned. Plenty of grass. From thence we traveled over

the point of a hill and down the side of the river some three miles and crossed the river. About two miles farther we crossed a beautiful creek. Plenty of grass. Two miles farther we crossed a small creek and camped on the north side. Plenty of grass. Days travel 16.

Although Renshaw's distances are not exact, it's rather easy to identify the landmarks he mentions. If we follow the landmarks in reverse order, we end up at the site of the Lone Pine. Renshaw's "small creek" is Wolf Creek, which the wagon trains crossed about one and one-half miles north of present-day North Powder and which was a popular campsite often referred to as the "third crossing," "west branch," or "west fork" of Powder River.

The "second crossing," "middle branch," or "middle fork" was North Powder River at the town of North Powder. Two miles south of North Powder was the "first crossing" or "main branch" of Powder River. But the emigrants first struck Powder River two and one-half miles south of the first crossing, the site of Renshaw's noon break, located where highway I-84 crosses Powder River between Coyote Peak to the west and Magpie Peak to the east, and heads north toward North Powder.

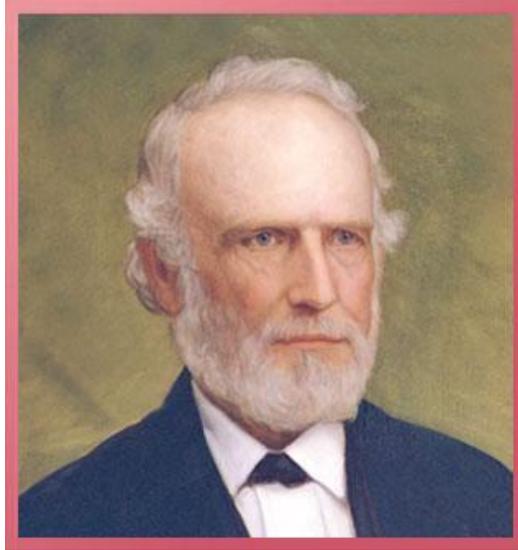
The Lone Pine was located ten miles southeast of that first siting of the Powder River at Renshaw's "water in holes," usually referred to in journals as the "Powder River Slough" or just plain "slough," "slue," or "slew." Today we know it as Baldock Slough. Many wagon trains camped at this site, as did James W. Nesmith a day before the tree was felled.

Wednesday, September 27 [1843]--Looney's wagon turned over this morning soon after leaving camp. We crossed the divide [between Alder Creek and Virtue Flat] and encamped at the lone pine tree. Traveled twelve miles. Snow, that fell the night before last on the mountains, in sight all day. Weather drizzly and rainy.

Thursday, September 28--Left the pine tree this morning. Traveled fourteen miles. Encamped on the third fork of Powder River [Wolf Creek]. Had a fine view of the snow-topped mountains through the clouds. Raining below them.

Later, since the Lone Pine had long since been cut down, most journals didn't mention it and the slough together, although they did sometimes refer to Baldock Slough as "Lone Tree Creek," (Hastings, 1847). But Peter Burnett, who became governor of California, recalled that his group "encamped on the branch of the Powder River at the Lone Pine," on the day the tree fell. His memoir written years later contains the most poignant account of the tree's demise.

[A]s I drove along, I would raise my head and look at that beautiful green pine. At last, on looking up as usual, the tree was gone. I was perplexed for a moment to know whether I was going in the right direction. There was the plain, beaten wagon road before me, and I drove on until I reached the camp just at dark. That brave old pine, which had withstood the storms and snows of centuries, had



Peter Burnett (1807-1895)

fallen at last by the vandal hands of man. Some of our inconsiderate people had cut it down for fuel, but it was too green to burn. It was a useless and most unfortunate act. Had I been there in time I should have begged those woodmen to "spare that tree."

James Clyman, who made the westward journey in 1844, noted in a September 23rd entry, "Nooned at what is called the lone Tree in the middle of a vally & a fine one it has been of the pine Spicies now cut down & all the branches used for fuel."

So, the Lone Pine was located on the Oregon Trail where it crossed Baldock Slough. But where did they intersect? Baldock Slough has its origin on the eastern edge of Baker City, flows north about seven miles, and then west about four miles to its confluence with Powder River. An 1864 government surveyor's map shows the "Emigrant Road" running in almost a straight line from the southeast to the northwest, crossing the "Powder River Slough" at a point in the NW $\frac{1}{4}$ of the SW $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 23 of Township 8 South, Range 40 East, of the Western Meridian.

Although mother nature has changed the course of Baldock Slough over the centuries and farmers have straightened it out in numerous places, today Baldock Slough still winds its way through about the same area documented by the 1864 map as the spot where the Oregon Trail crossed the slough.

How do you get to this likely former site of the Lone Pine? In terms of local roads, you can get close to where the Oregon Trail crossed Baldock Slough by driving north out of Baker City on I-84 five miles, exit onto the Medical Springs Highway at the 203 Pond, and drive about one and one-quarter miles east to Lindley Lane (the first road south). Then drive south on Lindley Lane two-thirds of a mile. About a third of a mile east of this point out in the pasture--don't enter without permission--is possibly close to where the Lone Pine once stood.

A closing note: Two ponderosa pine trees have been planted to commemorate the original Lone Pine. A granite marker at the foot of a thriving forty-foot ponderosa pine tree at the Baker City Municipal Airport tells us that on October 30, 1976, the Baker Garden Club planted a ponderosa in memory of club member Hazel Bates, who was the inspiration for the planting.

Then on September 26, 1990, members of the Baker Rotary Club, primarily Ken Crawford, Norm Sumner, and P. T. Hochbrueckner, planted a ponderosa pine on the east bank of Baldock Slough on Ralph Ward land just south of the road connecting Lindley Lane and Sunnyslope Road. The site is about a third of a mile south of the likely original location of the Lone Pine. That tree has recently died.

(Since this article was published, the State constructed an interpretive sign about the Lone Pine and placed it halfway up the hill on Highway 86 five miles east of Baker City. The author designed the sign for the State.)

©August 1993, Gary Dielman, Baker City, Oregon
(Revised July 2003 and March 2013)