

## Huckleberry Finn Playground

by  
Gary Dielman

The Powder River in Baker City was my Huckleberry Finn playground, when I was growing up at the north end of First Street in the '40s and '50s. Although nearby Geiser-Pollman Park with its swings, merry-go-round, and large slide was a fun place to play, the area along the river from the end of Main Street north to Hughes Lane was a wilderness full of adventure for me and playmates Bill Pollock, Dale Conklin, and Roger Simonsen, to name a few. Along the river, densely lined on both sides with trees, tall grass, and underbrush, we acted out our Tarzan and war fantasies. We had our secret "fort," which was nothing more than a hole beaten into the underbrush. With its soft floor of dried grass, the fort was a comfortable place to lie around protected from cold winds or hot summer sun, while we planned our next adventure.

The most unique feature of our North Baker wilderness was the large grove of tall native willow trees, commonly known as "Boys Jungle," located at the end of Main Street on the east bank of the river. Although we had no vines to swing Tarzan-like from tree to tree, we played on the skinnier willows by bending them down far enough to mount, then bounced up and down pretending they were bucking horses. Pathways through the willows, nettles, and other underbrush were body-width like a real jungle. We never gave a second thought to who might own the jungle. Adults stayed out. It was our place.

In more recent times, Boys Jungle acquired a reputation as a place where school-skipping kids hung out smoking pot or engaging in worse criminal activity. Spurred by this notoriety and a desire to make the willow grove more park-like, last summer volunteers cleared out brush and dead wood creating wide paths for leisurely side strolls off new Leo Adler Memorial Pathway, which skirts the willow grove's east side.

Boys Jungle, which today no longer has the jungle-like atmosphere of my childhood, has a history going back far before my time. In 1864, just before the settlement of Baker City, the grove drew the attention of the government surveyor, who in his field notes remarked, "Some willows on bank of river." Perhaps even more interesting is the surveyor's hand-drawn map of the Baker City area showing that the course of the river in 1864 was not a straight shot through what would become the heart of the city.

Rather, upon reaching the vicinity of today's underpass, the river turned due east along the north side of Spring Garden Hill (Old Reservoir Hill) as far as it could flow. From the vicinity of the freeway the river struck a northwesterly course to the end of Main Street, where it resumed its northward course.

An aerial view of the many abandoned channels north of Baker City reveals that over the millennia the course of Powder River has moved all over the valley.

Powder River was the life blood of our wilderness, although the river itself, at least in the summer and fall, was not particularly wild. In fact in the summer river flow was so slight we could hop across on strategically placed rocks without getting our shoes wet. But further north toward Hughes Lane there were pools deep enough to swim in, although I never did. I couldn't handle the idea of getting my head under water for fear I might gulp some of the unappetizing-looking liquid, which year round, not just during spring runoff, was the color of chocolate milk.

The source of the river's brown color was topsoil churned up by the gold dredge in Sumpter Valley. For decades, until 1954, dredges, floating on pools of Powder River water, scooped deep into the valley floor dredging up gold-bearing gravels off bedrock. The churning action suspended topsoil in the river's water which gradually settled out, but not until it had been carried well north of Baker City to the lazy "s" curves of the river channel in the Haines area.

There was so much silt in the Powder as it flowed through Baker City that fish could not live in it. As a consequence, fishing in town was a rare experience. But every July, when the dredge shut down for a couple of weeks, the turbidity of the water cleared up enough toward the end of the second week that one could catch what we called white fish or, on rare occasions, a rainbow trout.

Powder River in my neighborhood was not just one river but three rivers in one. Just behind the medical clinic of doctors Roger and Flora Biswell (today an accounting firm occupies the building) there was a diversion dam that sent water through two irrigation canals which ran north on each side of the river. Today the diversion dam is still there but sends water only into the east-side ditch. The west-side ditch has not been used for years. But in our day, if I wanted to get from the west side of the Powder, where I lived at 2855 1<sup>st</sup> Street, to the east side, I had to cross three water courses.

We crossed to the east side of the river quite often, because that was where we could really live the life of Huck Finn, or at least a weak imitation. Located just east of Boys Jungle was a huge gravel pit partially filled with clear ground water that made a nice summer-time swimming hole. But the most fun was floating around on a crude raft that had been there for years. We'd take off our shoes and socks, roll up our pants legs, and shove off to float around usually with water up to our ankles, for the raft floated a little below water level once we added our weight to the water-logged boards.

The river was also a playground where it flowed through Geiser-Pollman Park. East access to the river was via two sets of concrete stairs, one stairway on each side. Most fun was catching crawdads. Equipped with coffee cans to hold our catch, we'd turn over rocks under which crawdads hid and carefully grab them by the body behind their menacing big pinchers. If not done correctly, we found out why they were called pinchers. If any girls were around, we'd chase them

holding out a pincher-snapping, bug-eyed crawdad in front of us. Quite often we would pull off the edible crawdad tails with the idea of taking them home to eat. The poor crawdads suffered miserably at the hands of us kids. Water skippers, the only other living critter in the murky river, didn't escape our destructive attention. As they skated on the surface of the water, we bombarded them with rocks, the bigger the better.

In those days the land west of the river, on which the library now sits, was part of Geiser-Pollman Park. Concrete posts with heavy chains, a continuation of the present park fencing, bordered the Resort, Campbell, and Madison street sides, so that the whole park, except over the bridges, was encompassed. Within that section of the park west of the river, there was nothing but trees, grass, and two rectangular basins surrounded by decorative iron fencing that were full of water lily pads and a long, stringy water plant growing from the bottom that some kids took home to put in their goldfish bowls. The ponds also provided a home for frogs, small snails, and even water snakes.

Although my childhood experiences on the Powder took place during the meager summer-time flow, seasonal runoff could be menacing. My most vivid memory of an angry Powder River was the flood of February 1957 during my senior year in high school. A Chinook wind blew through on the heels of a period of extremely cold weather that had created ice as much as a foot thick, a disastrous combination. Melted snow from the mountains above Baker City rapidly became a torrent flowing over and under the thick ice south of town dislodging large, thick chunks of and rafting them into the city. With the river channel full of water, the blocks of ice piled up against the bridges.

With disaster looming, the governor mobilized Baker City's Company F of the Oregon National Guard, of which I and many of my classmates were members. Guardsmen and many citizens spend the better part of two days and nights filling sandbags or standing on bridges shoving slabs of thick ice underneath to keep flood waters from damming up behind accumulated ice. In spite of our best efforts, we were not successful in keeping the flood waters within the river channel. The city park and adjoining areas turned into a lake, parts of Grandview were flooded, and the river overflowed its banks north of town sending water down Hughes Lane all the way to Tenth Street and Highway 30.

The construction of Mason Dam cured the flooding problem but not before a similar flood took place in the early 1960s. By that time I was a student in graduate school at the University of Iowa with a family of my own. My days of childhood adventure growing up on Powder River in Baker City had come to an end.