

Speech to Oregon Trail Interpretive Center Siting Committee*

by Gary Dielman

My interest in the Oregon Trail started a few years ago with a question I wanted to find the answer to: What was this area like before the white man came? So I went to the Oregon Room of the Baker County Library and began reading...and reading...and reading. But the Indians had left no written records. I had to settle for reading what the earliest white men had to say about the area. Those accounts started back in 1543 with the first sighting of Oregon by Spanish explorers and with the dreaded British pirate, Sir Francis Drake, who in 1577 sailed in his ship the Golden Hind along the Oregon and Washington coasts as far north as Vancouver Island.

For a couple of centuries other explorers traded with the Indians--trinkets for furs--but no one ventured inland until 1792, when the American Robert Gray in the ship Columbia discovered the mouth to the Columbia River, crossed the bar, and sailed a few miles upriver. A couple of months later, the Englishman Broughton rowed up the Columbia as far as the mouth of the Sandy River. My reading was beginning to take me closer to Eastern Oregon.

Just a year later, in 1793, the white man's incursion into the vast area west of the Rocky Mountains took a quantum leap forward when Sir Alexander McKenzie and a contingent of ten men of the Northwest Co., rival of the great Hudson's Bay Co, crossed the Canadian Rockies, descended the Fraser and Bella Coola Rivers in present-day British Columbia 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.

The next crossing of the continent, thanks to the farsightedness of President Jefferson, came within sight of Eastern Oregon. The Lewis and Clark Expedition left St. Louis in the spring of 1804 with a troop of about 50 men and Sacajawea. They crossed Northern Idaho and descended the Snake River. My favorite passage from the journal of Meriwether Lewis was written on the evening of October 15, 1805. The Expedition had just finished a day of floating down the Snake River from the mouth of the Clearwater River headed toward the confluence of the Snake and Columbia rivers. Lewis looked south from a vantage point above the Snake River and made this observation:

The plains are waving, and as we walked in them, we could plainly discover a range of mountains bearing southeast and northwest, becoming higher as they advanced towards the north, the nearest point bearing south about sixty miles from us.

The mountains he is referring to are the mountains of Northeast Oregon. This was about as close to Baker County as the Lewis and Clark Expedition got.

The next expedition took place just five years later, when Wilson Price Hunt lead the overland Astor Expedition along part of the Oregon Trail. In 1812, Robert Stuart of the Astor Expedition lead a party back to the States. He is credited with being the first to go

the full length of the Oregon Trail. It is curious to note that this party blazed the trail in reverse.

The Astor Expedition was followed immediately by the fur trappers who scoured the Northwest for fur the next 30 years. Next came the missionaries in the middle 1830s.

And finally starting in the early 1840s, the settlers turned the trail into a wagon road which carried one of the largest migrations of people in the history of mankind. As a result, the Oregon Trail can be thought of as a 2000-mile long symbol for the settlement of the West. The settlers who trudged those many miles--many walked, not rode, the whole way--helped lay the United States' claim to the vast territory west of the Rocky Mountains. The British and the Spanish were determined to make the territory theirs. They had arguably valid claims through their early explorations by sea. But settlers were the United States' trump card in negotiations with the British over the Northwest and were crucial to the defeat of the Spanish in California.

For many of us who live on the Oregon Trail, the trail is a part of our lives we take for granted. When I was a youngster hunting rabbits on Virtue Flat, it did not occur to me that that dirt road cutting across Virtue Flat diagonal to all sections lines was the same ground the pioneers traveled in their wagons. Today I think of nothing else every time I drive out Highway 86. But there are many who do not realize what a tremendous fascination the Oregon Trail holds for many people for whom the Oregon Trail has the same historical significance and mystique as Jamestown, Plymouth Rock, and the Liberty Bell. Even foreigners, as evidenced by the recent visit of the journalist from Great Britain, are captivated by the stories of the pioneers headed for new beginnings rolling along in their covered wagons on the dusty trail beset by lack of water and feed, dissention among themselves, disease, and occasionally inhospitable Indians.

And some people here in Eastern Oregon may not realize what a prominent part Baker County played in the Oregon Trail. For one thing, Baker County with about 90 miles of the Oregon trail has a bigger share of the Oregon Trail than any other county except Fremont County in Wyoming (115 miles). For another, Baker County had Burnt River Canyon. Whereas for the most part, the Oregon Trail followed the path of least resistance from the Mississippi River to the Willamette Valley, travelers had some leeway to go a little north or a little south, to take a cutoff here or a shortcut there. But when the trail got to Oregon, there was in the beginning only one practical route: up the tortuous Burnt River Canyon. As one teenager was quoted asking his father as he looked into the canyon from the hills near Huntington: "Do we have to go down into that awful place?" Eastern Oregon, with its Burnt River Canyon and the Blue Mountains, presented the pioneers their first real mountainous terrain. By comparison, South Pass through the Rocky Mountains in Wyoming was almost flat. Even the indomitable Marcus Whitman in August 1836 abandoned his two-wheeled cart on the east bank of the Snake River near Ontario rather than battle his way with it up Burnt River Canyon and over the Blues. Narcissa Whitman gave this explanation:

Perhaps you will wonder why we left our wagon, having taken it so nearly through. Our animals were failing and the route in crossing the Blue Mountains is said to be impassable for it.



Narcissa Whitman (1808-1847)

Burnt River Canyon was an uninviting passageway but, as some learned through bitter experience, it was the only practical one. In 1811, the already starving Astor Expedition, lost several precious days in an abortive attempt to reach the Columbia River by following Snake River all the way to its mouth. And in 1834, Captain Bonneville and several men and animals, according to Washington Irving in his historical novel *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville*, starved and labored through waist-deep snow for about ten days in a February crossing of the ridge between Hells and Imnaha canyons, all this because he was unaware of the Indian trail up Burnt River Canyon. And the fateful Lost Wagon Train guided by Stephen Meeks thought to avoid Burnt River Canyon and the Blue Mountains by taking a shortcut straight through the center of the state. Many died and the train still ended up going all the way to the Columbia River via the Deschutes River Canyon.

So we see that Burnt River Canyon was a difficult, constricted passageway through which all the early wagon trains were funneled. It is not surprising that it is mentioned in many diaries kept by those who passed through it. Although Narcissa Whitman did not mention the canyon, her fellow traveler, W.H. Gray had this to say:

[O]ur trail being along the sides of the mountain and only wide enough for a single animal to pass winding around and along steep precipices and among the rocks which scarcely permits the foot of man or beast to secure a firm foothold, while passing along.

A couple of years later (1838), more missionaries came through Baker County. The diaries of Myra Eells and Mary Walker yield these early impressions of the area starting somewhere south of Huntington:

Aug. 21 (Tuesday)-- The party awakened to a grass fire. Went 20 miles and camped on Burnt River. Found choke cherries, elder berries of the finest sort & sumac, the first I have seen on the journey.

Aug. 22--Traveled along Burnt River where the Indians attempt to sell us berries.

Aug. 23--Three horses were taken by the Indians overnight. Camped again on Burnt River. Conners' squaw is about to give birth. Climbed hills higher than any we have passed at all. They told us we were done with mountains long ago, but if these are not hills I know not what they are.

Aug. 24--Camped at "Lone Tree". Indian sent by M. Whitman met us with a letter. This tree stands in the midst of a plain. On both sides are snow-capped mountains.

Aug. 25--Camped in Grande Ronde Valley. Conners and his wife stayed behind. She gave birth to a daughter before sunset. (Just like Madame Dorion.)

Mention of the Lone Pine reminds me of another reason why the Oregon Trail through Baker County is so prominent in the history of the trail. As early as 1818, the tree was a well-known landmark to the trappers of the Northwest Company, many of them French Canadians, who called it "l'arbre seul" and used that name to refer to the valley in which the lone pine stood. Narcissa Whitman mentioned it in her diary entry of August 26, 1836:

Came on as far as the Lone Tree. The place called Lone Tree is a beautiful valley in the region of Powder river, in the center of which is a solitary tree quite large, by the side of which travellers usually stop and refresh themselves.

Narcissa slept under the lone pine in a tent which she needed for she noted that, "the wind blew quite hard & the prospect was for a cool night."

But as famous as the Lone Pine was for the early-day traveler, it was actually seen by just a few of the many wagon trains that passed through Baker Valley, for it was cut down in 1843, the year the wagon trains really got rolling along the Oregon Trail in any great number. In this passage from the recollections of Peter Burnett in the March 1904 issue of the Oregon Historical Quarterly he describes the demise of the tall pine:

We passed through some beautiful valleys and encamped on the branch of the Powder River at the Lone Pine. This noble tree stood in the center of a most lively valley about ten miles from any other timber. It could be seen at a distance of many miles, raising its majestic form above the surrounding plain, and constituted a beautiful landmark for the guidance of the traveler. Many teams had passed on before me, and at intervals, as 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 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 woodsmen to spare that tree! I would like to close with my personal view about the proposed six-million dollar Oregon Trail Monument. The Oregon Trail and the history it represents deserve a monument. I can think of no better place for the monument along the Trail's 2000 miles than right here in Baker County. Done with imagination, taste, and an appreciation of the trail's place in history, the monument would, I predict, meet enthusiastic acceptance from travelers and be of great benefit to the local economy.

*ca. 1989

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