

A short History of Copperfield, Oregon  
by  
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The unincorporated community of Copperfield, Oregon, elevation 1,700 feet, also known as Oxbow, is located at the confluence of Pine Creek and Snake River on the eastern border of Baker County. A sharp bend in the river at that site is called the Oxbow of Snake River.

In 1895, prospectors made big copper strikes on both sides of Snake River a few miles north of the Oxbow, but the mines could not be developed due to lack of transportation. In 1898, some preliminary work was done for a spur railroad off the mainline from Huntington 58 miles north to Iron Dyke copper mine on the Oregon side of Snake River.

In 1907, work started up again on the railroad, which included digging a 2,100-foot tunnel through the neck of the Oxbow. And the predecessor of Idaho Power Company began construction of a power plant at the Oxbow that included a dam on Snake River to divert water through a separate Oxbow tunnel.

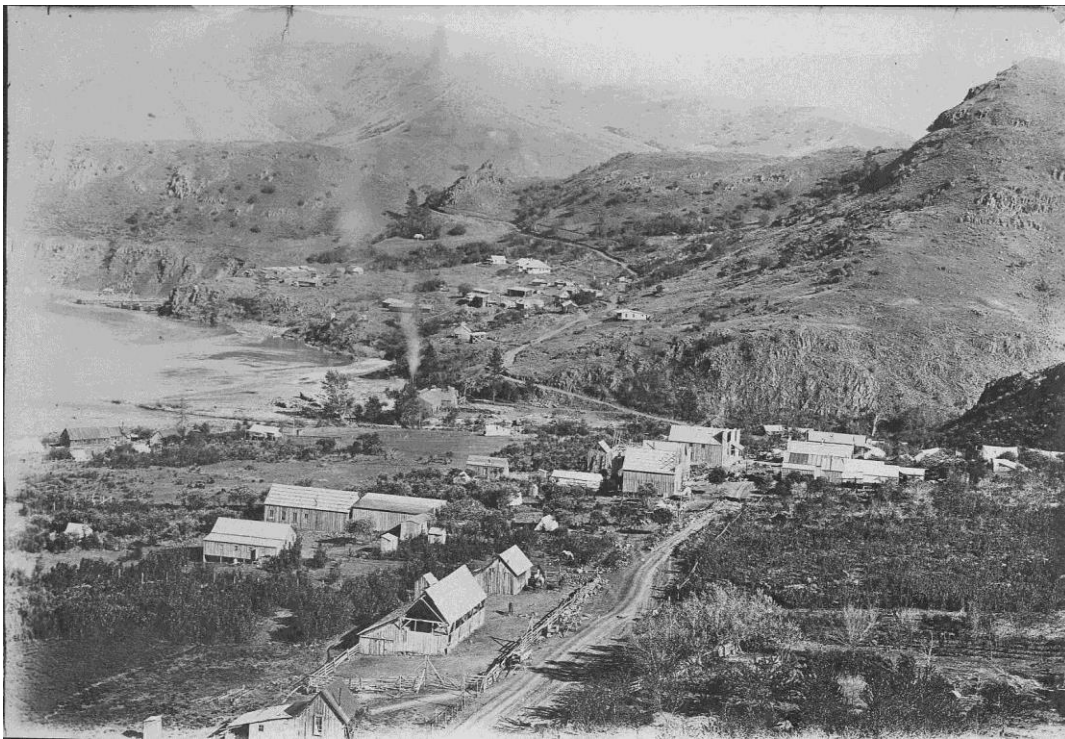


*Copperfield in its heyday, ca. 1910.*

In the spring of 1907, anticipating an influx of workers to the Oxbow area, James Harvey Graham, a Baker City realtor, bought the 160-acre Jake Vaughn farm and platted the town Copperfield. Graham soon sold out to Baker City bankers John Schmitz and William Pollman, Baker City's mayor.

Almost overnight Copperfield's main street was lined with businesses, including eleven saloons and as many brothels, two hotels, two boarding houses, three stores, barber shop, post office, meat market, livery barn, depot, and a huge tent city on the outskirts. Saloons illegally served liquor on Sundays and ignored Oregon's gambling prohibition.

The town had a marshal and a four-cell jail, used mostly for drunks, with a dance hall on the second floor that also served as city hall. Rival gangs of power plant and railroad workers participated in organized melees, no knives or guns allowed. The Baker County sheriff was in Baker City, the county seat, a hard two-day's ride west. Copperfield soon developed a reputation as a wide-open, lawless town reminiscent of the Old West.



*Copperfield looking SE toward the neck of the oxbow of Snake River.  
Pine Creek joins Snake River at middle right.*

In late 1909, the railroad was completed to Copperfield and in 1910 reached its end point four miles further north at Homestead, a mining camp serving the Iron Dyke Mine. In 1910 construction was also completed on the power plant. With construction workers moving out, Copperfield's population, at times over 1,000, had by 1914 dropped to just 80 residents.



*Oxbow of Snake River, looking north.  
Before construction of Oxbow Dam.*

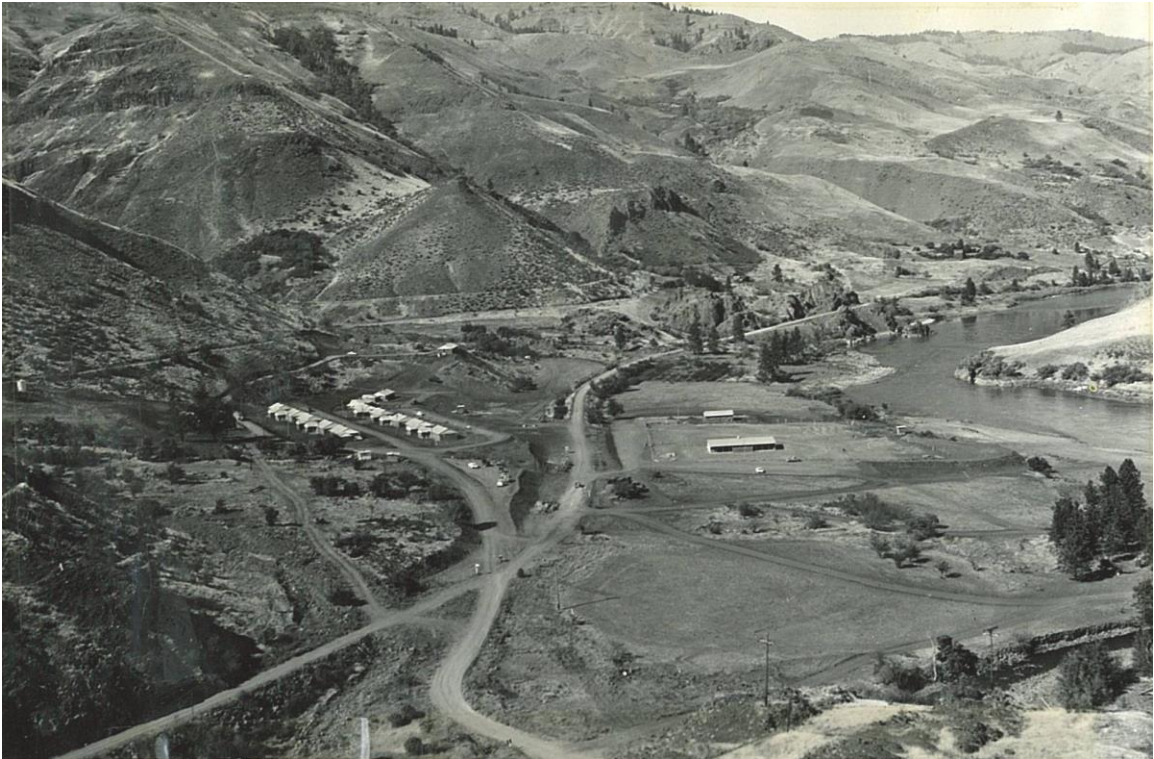
Copperfield was small in size but on January 2, 1914, still had a reputation for lawlessness. That's when Oregon Governor Oswald West sent his private secretary, Fern Hobbs, and five militiamen to Copperfield to put the town under martial law resulting in nation-wide news coverage.

The first school (District 68) was built on the hillside above town in 1908. School census was 31 in 1912, 35 in 1913, but in 1914 after the Copperfield Affair dropped to 13. In 1945, District 68 was annexed to District 63 at Homestead.

In 1915, a conflagration all but wiped what was left of Copperfield off the map. A fire in 1917 left standing just the school house and post office, which discontinued service in 1927.

The railroad went out of service in 1931. Thirty miles of rails were removed from Homestead south to Robinette and the right-of-way was deeded to Baker County, which converted the rail bed into a county road.

In the late 1950's, Copperfield roared back to life as a company town of a couple hundred trailers houses, when Idaho Power Company began construction of three high dams on Snake River. Construction of Brownlee Dam 15 miles south was finished in 1959, Oxbow Dam in 1961, and Hells Canyon Dam 15 miles north in 1967.



*Idaho Power employee housing at former Copperfield site.  
During construction of Oxbow Dam.*



*Copperfield site today, now known as Oxbow.*



Idaho Power built a modern school building in Copperfield for the children of construction workers. Later the building became a company office. Presently it serves as a community center. There are a few permanent houses for Idaho Power employees located on the site of the original main street.

An interstate bridge to the Idaho side accommodates traffic downriver to Hells Canyon Dam making Copperfield the southern entrance to Hells Canyon, reputed to be the deepest gorge in North America.

On the banks of Snake River below the old town site, Idaho Power operates a large, full-service camping park, which serves recreationists who come to fish, boat, and water ski in the impoundment waters of the three dams and to enjoy the warm climate. Hells Canyon is known as the banana belt of Eastern Oregon.

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