

Marilyn Wilson
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Dear Ms. Wilson,

I read your request for information about the old two story stone house near I-84 east of Baker City in the Baker City Herald with interest.

Let me give you my brief background in relation to this house.

I was born in 1924 (I'm 77) and raised on a ranch on Alder Creek about 1-½ miles S.E. of this particular house. I lived there and further south on Alder Creek until 1938.

In the late 1960s my wife and I acquired land I was raised on. In subsequent years, we added more ground, the closest being approximately two mile from the stone house. We still own this property.

The stone house sits on the north side of a small seasonal watercourse named "Dogtown Creek". I don't know how such a mostly dry channel earned that name.

I do not know exactly when the stone house was constructed, but I would guess sometime shortly after the beginning of the twentieth century. It is about the same time the Baker County Court House, Baker City Hall, St Francis Cathedral and other buildings in Baker City were erected from the volcanic tuff stone quarried at Pleasant Valley. The inside wall and ceiling finishes were plaster overwood lath which, on the stone walls was nailed to the stone. Often the plaster had horsehair added to the mix to help bind it together. Neither of these two rural structures had electricity or indoor plumbing until after WWII.

The volcanic tuff quarries are visible from I-84 about 2 miles further east of the stone house. There is a stand of Ponderosa pine on the quarry site to the right (south) of the freeway going east. Other excavations were made on the opposite side of the interstate and are also visible

My memory is not infallible, but I believe the Pierce (or Pearce) family built the stone house. My recollection is from about 1930 a miller family occupied the dwelling. I went to grade school with a son.

Incidentally, the elementary school house on the opposite side of I-84 about a mile further east is also built of the same volcanic tuff stone. My father and another man hauled the stone for it from the quarry in a wagon. It was built in 1928. It is now a private residence.

I lost track of ownership for a few years. In the early 1960s Lester and Barbara Briske owned the property and lived in the house. They were the last to live there. When the freeway was constructed, part of it crossed Briske's land, which they sold for the right of

way giving them enough money to build a new house about ¾ of a mile S.E. of the stone house. I was a building contractor at that time (now retired) and constructed Briske's new home of pumice block. It has a full basement. Several years later, Marc Sackos, a realtor in Baker City, bought the entire 3660 acre ranch from Briske. Both of the Briskes passed away several years ago.

From a geology standpoint, the stone house is sitting on an ancient (Mt Hood of years old) lakebed sediments composed primarily of volcanic ash. Earth movement over the eons has disturbed and altered the lake that at one time extended to Baker Valley during a much wetter and warmer climate.

The first track of the Oregon Trail that had wagons go all the way to Oregon in 1843 turned off to the east a short way below the tuff stone quarry sites. In about 1850, a route was constructed up Alder Creek then over the divide between the Burnt River drainage and the Powder River watershed. This wagon and pack train route came through the low saddle about a half-mile east of the stone house and presently is used by I-84. This route shortened the journey for the pioneers. It also provided much needed water from Alder Creek to east of the divide and Ebell and Sutton Creek to the west. From the time it was opened for wagon use, until the railroad and later auto traffic become the mode of transportation, this route was used by freighters, mule trains, stagecoaches and foot travelers going and coming from the Idaho gold fields.

The railroad was pushed through about 1883-84 and is still in use today. The early steam locomotives needed a helper engine to haul their loaded cars from Huntington (where the rails left the Snake River) to the summit just N.W. of the stone house. There use to be a wye at this summit location called "Encina" for the helper engines to reverse directions. Until the 1940 there was a wooden warehouse painted yellow with white trim at Encina used to store sacked grain to be shipped by rail. The grain was threshed at the various ranches with steam-powered tractors providing belt energy to run the threshing machines. That sacked grain was hauled by wagon to the rail side storage.

The most recent development in this vicinity is an organization called "Thunder Mountain" creating a racing facility for hot rod car fans and related speed contests.

I hope I haven't strayed too far a field from what prompted your request in the Baker City Herald. If you have further questions or wish to stop to have a closer inspection of the stone house, give me a call or drop a note (I guess e-mail in the modern equivalent).

Sincerely,

Sid Johnson