

1865 DIARY OF CAPTAIN LOREN L. WILLIAMS OF THE OREGON VOLUNTEERS

The following is the complete diary of Captain Loren L. Williams from November 7, 1865 thru November 12, 1865. Captain Williams clearly writes what he seen in his search for Indians around the south side of Malheur and Harney Lakes. His diary is precise and detailed and gives the first clear picture of what the area was like. I have copied the diary as written but added in parenthesis words for clarification or names of locations relevant to this monogram. Words which were impossible to read are represented with the following mark ----. CAPTAIN WILLIAMS' DIARY HAS NEVER BEEN PUBLISHED. (Courtesy of The Newberry Library. Everett D. Graff Collection of Western Americana. Chicago, Illinois.)

Tuesday, Nov. 7, 1865

I set out [Camp Wright] with 20 Infy [Infantry] and 20 Cav [Cavalry] and proceeded across the sage plain east of us leaving the E. end of Malheur Lake to our right and passing through a low gap on the Mts we fell upon a small tributary of Malheur River about 20 miles and camped at 10 oclock P. M.

Wednesday, Nov 8, 1865

At daylight I was out with small detachments in different directions upon and down the little valley searching for Indians but fail to find any fresh sign.

At about 10 A. M. we set out SW. through the hills and at about 7 miles we were upon the East end of the Lake and then westerly along the S. side a few miles and camped on the margin a little after dark.

Thursday, Nov. 9, 1865

No fires were allowed last night as we were expecting to find Indian Ranches [Indian quarters] early this morning which we did find but they had been deserted two or three days.

Malheur Lake derives its name from Malheur River which for many years was supposed to have its source in the Lake but upon more thorough inspection it is found that a low range of sage hills separate the waters of the lake form those of the River.

The Lake is shallow and nearly level with the surrounding plain. Malheur Lake is a vast swampy filled with swamp grass and tules and the water strongly impregnated with alkali, open water appears in places of half mile or more in extent and sometimes more while the Lake and swamp on the South side is perhaps 6 or 7 miles in extent in that direction while as it extends west ---- it gradually narrows into a swale or swamp of water and high tules of some one or two miles in width, with small spaces of open water and thickets of tules alternating: This channel extends to Harney Lake some miles to the west----.

The Indians crossed this channel to fight the scouts on Sept. 23, but up to this time we have been unable to find any practical place for crossing.

On the south side of the Lake and slough is a narrow strip of level sage land extending back a half a mile or more to the foot of the low hills.

This appears to be the favorite season for water fowl and the abundance of Swan, geese, brants, pelicans, ducks of every variety, white and blue cranes, gulls, snipe of various kinds, sizes and colors and ---- can scarcely be conceived, and the ---- ---- of aquatic birds of all kind moving through the air and the continual cry and scream of each variety combined to make such music as no pen can describe: In the Lake wherever the open water appears it was one complete map of fowls, so much so that often for a half mile an opening could not be seen between them: The long necked swan appears to be by far the largest bird among this vast multitude of aquatics and it was amusing to see a flock of swans fly along on the surface in their efforts to rise running over flocks of geese and ducks which happened to before them: The smaller birds, flying, dodging, or diving under water to go around this swan, which would ---- over them the same as if they were so many flies upon the surface.

We set out from camp this morning at day light westerly along the slough and at about 9 miles we came to a large spring [Sod House Spring where the Headquarter buildings for Malheur National Wildlife Refuge are located] gushing out of the bluffs and within about 1/4 mile of the mouth of Thunder River [Blitzen River] coming in from the South. About which place the enemy ---- we found in full force, but after a thorough examination of the country around about we were only able to find where 2 footmen had been during the night or very early that morning and their tracks appear to be headed in the direction of Steens

Mountain some 20 or 30 miles South.

We returned to the spring mentioned above and cooked our breakfast and soon after set out up the River on the East side in a course due south or nearly so: Deserted ranches appearing at short intervals and a few fresh moccasin tracks occasionally were seen in the trail but nothing to indicate that there was any considerable force of Indians near here at present.

Thunder River is a deep sluggish stream with muddy banks and about 30 feet wide rises in the Steens Mountain some 30 or 40 miles off S. Westerly.

We followed up this stream about 13 miles following the well beaten trails [Indian trails and possibly the 1853 Immigrant route] and found many deserted camps [Indian] and finally crossed over [Rockford Crossing on the Blitzen River] on the opposite side and camped at the lower margin of Tule swamp land which appears to extend up stream several miles from here.

Friday, Nov. 10, 1865

The men and animals requiring rest we remained at this camp today and little parties were sent out to explore the valley in the vicinity of camp.

The deserted Indian Camps were numerous. Generally some distance back from the stream built very temporarily under the ---- of a thick sage brush in such a manner as to be ---- unless you ---- within a few feet of them. A thick bunch of sage is selected and a quantity of Rye grass is gathered and with an ---- of smaller sage brush a kind of wall is made to protect in the form of a semicircle to protect them from the prevailing winter winds ---- ---- this little temporary ---- a small fire a family of Indians will ---- ---- the miserable cold weather seldom ---- against rain or any manner whatever.

We found the tracks of many Indians in the sand where they had been prowling around last night with a view of stealing some of our pack mules but could not find where they had gone or from whence they had came.

During the day a brisk white dust was discovered by the Sentinel on the West side of the valley and above: About 3 miles from Camp: The air was calm the dust would raise at short periods and fill the air and soon after settle down and various was the conjecture in regard to its cause: The air being still it could not be caused by the wind. It remained ---- the same ---- was not likely the Indians or wild animals yet it appeared to continue regular at short intervals.

Some presumed it Indians others antelope and others thought it blue Sandhill Cranes wallowing in the dust and as myself I was unable to determine what did cause it and to solve the mystery I took 5 Cavalry men and rode over to see for myself what there was to be discovered: The dust was in a little cove at the foot of the Mts. We approached the place cautiously every man in readiness to meet an enemy but instead of finding Indians or birds or wild animals we came to a beautiful dry alkali point about 1/4 mile in extent with an ---- of pure snow while ---- about 1/4 inch thick over the surface but no animals or Indians or the tracks of sign of either were to be found: We galloped our horses over the pond but could raise no dust and the surface appeared so solid that the horses hoofs did not make ---- over 1/2 inch deep: We were now more puzzled than ever but our minds were soon relieved by a slight and ---- ---- puff of air from a deep ravine on the West and at once the fine alkali dust rose in a little cloud from the surface of the little pond. The mystery was over and we returned to camp.

In one of the deserted ranches today we found the hair of two white persons. one of dark color and the other light and both very fine. the light colored hair had more the appearance of that of a young girl than of a grown person.

The water above [North of Rockford Crossing] appears to be spread out over a vast surface of Tules, flags and Marsh or swamp grass while at or just below our camp there appears to be a fall of 6 or 8 feet into a muddy canal [Probably the canal which passes through the Hiram Wright 160 acre homestead. Peter French was shot at a gate near the Wright house and barn] which continues down to the mouth of the River. and we doubt much if a practicable crossing exist between this from the mouth.

Saturday, Nov. 11, 1865

This morning we set out for Harney Lake in a course a little North of West crossing several small muddy streams near camp which appear to be mere outlets of the swamp above. [Passing through what was later Big Sagebrush Field north of Rockford Lane] several of the pack mules miring down in course rolling over in the mud and water wetting the packs as much as possible as mules usually do. but we soon reached the

foot hills and ascended a low ridge to the summit. and thence by a gradual descent down a ravine for five or six miles when we found ourselves on a live sage plain on the South side of Harney Lake and about a mile from the beach. Continuing along Westerly with a small lake of about 11/2 miles in extent to our left. gradually drawing nearer until we found ourselves in the beach of Harney Lake.

We continued along about 6 miles further crossing the West end of the Lake a short distance and camped at the foot of a high rocky cliff with a brisk little stream rushing from its base to the Lake.[Springs at the Double O Ranch]

Harney Lake is a handsome sheet of water. deep and green colored about 8 miles long E to W and about 5 miles wide N to S. Was named after Gen. Harney of the U. S. Army.

Along the East side of the Lake appears a ridge of drifting sand a few feet high and a narrow and deep channel breaks through said ridge and suddenly expands into the Tully swamp of one mile or more in width extending Eastward to Malheur Lake.

At this point Capt. Curry's Command in 1864 experienced much difficulty and --- in not being able to cross this channel: The water of the Lake is salt and strongly impregnated with alkali and is wholly unfit for use.

Many brisk little streams are running into the Lake. besides Silver Creek, Thunder River and Silvies River yet the Lake has no outlet.

Pleaston [sic] Butte [Iron Mountain] an isolated --- mountain rises abruptly from the plain a few miles West of the West end of the Lake and was named after Genl. Pleasanton while he was in Oregon an Adjt. [Adjutant] of Genl. Harney.

Sunday, Nov. 12, 1865

It rained a little towards morning and we find it very chilly and disagreeable with a cold wind from the S. W.

We set out at an early hour crossing through a section of marsh land bordering the Lake on the West. Crossing several rapid little streams and came to Silver Creek. which at this season of the year has a deep broad channel but no water. We continued through the sage plain and reached Camp Wright a little after dark. the men tired and --- having made a long march of over 30 miles.

The distance traveled on this Scout in 5 traveling days has been 110 miles which is rather an --- awesome average for Infantry.