

# **Follyfarm, Oregon**

## **Analysis of a Dead Town**

A discussion of the now extinct town of Follyfarm, Oregon is important to me, as a great part of my life was associated with that town, and most all of it has been associated with the region surrounding the area. Any discussion must survey the total landscape- both natural and man-made- to gain an understating of the processes that went on in the formation of the town, as well as its eventual demise. This paper will be focuses on the natural features of Sunrise Valley, the evolution of settlement in the valley, the functional activities of the town, and the events leading to the eventual death of the town, to impress upon the reader my feelings on those processes and on the area itself.

Follyfarm is located in Sunrise Valley, a dropped block of basaltic baserock, filled to a level plain with glacio-fluvial sediments deposited predominantly during periods of Pleistocene glaciation, and derived from nearby Steens Mountain. The valley is bordered on the west and north of the Steens Mountain scarp, and on the south by the uplifted Sheephead Mountains. The eastern border of the valley is lies close to the area of broken lava beds locally known as the Owyhee Desert. According to the physical landform regions, Sunrise Valley is at the extreme edge of the basin-range province, bordered by the drainage of the Owyhee River, known as the Owyhee Uplands.

The climate of the valley is difficult to determine exactly- as there are no weather stations there, nor in the immediate vicinity- but by generalizing, a fairly accurate representation can be determined. The average July temperature falls between the 70 degree F and 75 degree isotherms, while the average January temperature falls between the 24 degree F and 28 degree isotherms. Actual temperatures have reached as high as 110 degrees F. and as low as -35 degrees F on an unofficial thermometer at Follyfarm.

Average annual rainfall in Sunrise Valley approaches ten inches per year, with the largest proportion received during the winter months, and the rest arriving with convective thunderstorms moving from the south along the east scarp of Steens Mountain. Steens Mountain itself is a dominating factor in determining the

climate for areas on its leeward side. Interception of rainfall, creating a dry rain shadow is probably the most important single feature, but valley and mountain winds caused by differing air pressures at different points and altitudes are a regular occurrence along the east side of the mountain.

The vegetation of the area is largely a product of the climate, but human influence has been predominate in vegetation associations, especially since white settlement and land use have dominated the area. Between glacial advances on Steens Mountain, Sunrise Valley was filled with glacial melt water. Early Indians, who were predominately marsh dwellers, probably sustained themselves on tule and cattails growing around the lake margin, while also gathering seeds from assorted greases growing on the upper slopes away from the lake. During xerothermic periods the lake probably dried up, leaving a saline playa, and associated vegetation- salt grasses and greasewood. Further fluvial deposition has largely covered the alkaline playa, and allowed a different type of vegetation. Sagebrush and the bunchgrasses probably came into the valley at this time. One theory holds that the Indians of the region burned the valleys occasionally to maintain a grassland vegetation.

One important species in the grassland association was the Basin Wild Rye, which was an important food source for the Paiutes throughout the Great Basin. The rye tends to disappear from the association when the valley completely dries up and the Indians move to a different area. Many artifacts collected from the area show that at least one time, the valley was an area of Indian concentration. It is possible that the grassland could have been maintained by lightning caused fires, but I am not arguing the causal factors- only the fact that at one time, the valley floor was covered with lush grasses and Indians utilized these grasses as a food source. With more xerothermic trends, the vegetation progresses from the grassland associations to the sagebrush and few grasses that are present now.

John H. Neal, a civil engineer who had come to the Steens Mountain area from Canyon City to work for Peter French, was the first settler in Sunrise Valley. He had sold his homestead on Riddle Creek and moved to Burns to become the first surveyor for the newly formed Harney County. He, his wife Dorcas, and their two daughters had filed for land in Sunrise Valley, but still lived in Burns, where the two girls were attending high school. In 1905, the Neals built a small claim on

their land, if only to keep their land claim valid and to provide a temporary home. Neal surveyed and built an elaborate irrigation system comprised of ditches and dams to concentrate the annual surface water runoff onto his land, which he had plowed and planted in alfalfa- a species foreign in that area at the time. His activities earned his property the name of “Neal’s Folly Farm” a name that was shortened to Follyfarm in 1909 when the U.S. Post Office opened service in the area. By this time there were thirteen families living in Sunrise Valley.

Realizing the potential and necessity for a town and its services in the area, the Neals began construction of the “Big House” in 1910. Eventually, the town grew—the Big House becoming an inn for visitors to the area; other structures being: a general store, a livery, a granary, a blacksmith shop, the post office, and a new primary school. Essentially, Follyfarm was a one family town, with everything being owned and operated by the Neal family, but a great deal of activity was constantly going on.

During the period between 1914 and 1919, the residents of Sunrise Valley constructed a hand built, graveled road from the valley to the new railhead at Venator, on the South Fork of the Malheur River. Prior to the construction of the road, Neal’s daughters hauled supplies for the store by wagon from Ontario- then the nearest railroad siding to the area.

John Neal and his wife retired in 1914, leaving the ranch and the town in the hands of their daughter, Ada, and her new husband, William Renwick. Their other daughter, Mary, had married Frank Kueny, and moved to his stock ranch south of Andrews at the foot of the Steens. As Renwick was primarily a stockman, he soon lost interest in managing the business interests of the young and thriving town. After a series of events had changed activities for settlers in the valley, the Pollock brothers began construction of the “New Follyfarm” at the edge of the valley on their land in Malheur County. Construction of the new town began in 1919, and growth ended in 1929 when the post office was moved there from the old townsite. Activity at the new town was less that it had been at the old town, but the combination of services offered and the livestock industry proved profitable for the Pollocks until Tom Pollock was murdered in 1940. During that period of time, there were only two families remaining in the valley, the Pollocks and the

Renwicks, but the store, service station, and post office received enough business from people passing through the area to sustain activity there.

Both townsites were the functional centers for the farmers and stockmen in the area during their heydays. The old town had been the only shopping center with a reasonable travelling distance for the farming families living in Sunrise valley, as well as for the many stockmen for many miles surrounding the town. It had been a natural supply center for Basque shepherds who were trailing their sheep from winter pasture on the Owyhee Desert to spring and summer pasture on Sheepshead Mountain and Steens Mountain, then back again to the Owyhee desert. "New Follyfarm" could only depend on the stockmen's trade, so all of the farmers had abandoned their lands in the valley. The new town could also depend on occasional travelers from Burns or Vale going south to Winnemucca, or Reno, Nevada as it was situated on the main road for north-south traffic between those areas. Both towns served as oases for drovers and their herds from Harney Valley, as their locations were on the main trail for marketing herds and flocks from Burns to Winnemucca, where livestock and wool was loaded onto trains bound for the demanding California markets.

Eventual construction of the railroad from Venator to Burns was one of the elements leading to the death of Follyfarm, but not the most important. The shipping pattern for livestock had been changed, with cattle, sheep and wool from Harney Valley being shipped by rail from Burns to eastern markets along the Union Pacific line, while livestock and wool from Alvord Valley and areas to the south of Sunrise Valley were still being shipped to California from the rail siding at Winnemucca.

The old town began to lose its function as a shopping center for local farmers when in 1917, a severe drought in the region began. The farmers had depended on the rainfall to nourish their crops on the dryland farms. Their farms were blowing away with the winds and the farmers, disappointed by failure, began to abandon their farms and move out of the area. They tried to build new plans and dreams in new places. The newly developing lumber industry absorbed many of the disheartened farmers from eastern Oregon. The only settlers who were able to maintain were those who had concentrated their activities on the livestock industry- either raising sheep for wool production or cattle for beef production.

The remaining stockmen were able to expand their operations by purchasing the abandoned farms or by taking them over because of outstanding debts owed them.

The next event which contributed greatly to the death of the new town was largely a result of the drought. In 1934, the U.S. Government passed a law limiting the numbers of animals grazing on the public domain, as well as levying charges for the animals that were allowed, to finance the Bureau of Land Management—the organization that grew out of the Taylor Grazing Act. The grasslands had been reduced to a wasteland, so lands that had previously sustained the same numbers of animals could no longer maintain because of reduced moisture. The sheepmen were virtually wiped out, because along with higher operating costs, they were faced with either lower or stable market prices. The cattlemen were least affected, because rising cattle prices and quotas on imported beef were strengthened. Also, the cattlemen were more entrenched as they owned the better bottomlands with water while the sheepmen were always forced to move their flocks from place to place to find food and water.

Improved technology in the automobile industry had its effect on Follyfarm too. The Oregon State Highway Department, following a policy to provide a network of the most modern highways on the west coast for its taxpayers, decided to improve the road from Burns to the Nevada border. They took control of the maintenance of the road from Venator to Follyfarm, paved the road from Burns to Crane, and then in 1946, began paving a new route of travel from Boise, Idaho and Winnemucca, Nevada. But, Oregon Highway 78 to Denio, Nevada where it joins Nevada State Highway 140, which has been developed into the Winnemucca-to-the-sun highway. Malheur County maintains the graveled road from Highway 78 through Crowley, to Harper where it joins U.S. Highway 20. The county roads provided the town with a slow trickle of traffic but not volume enough to sustain a town. In 1949, the U.S. Post Office discontinued service to Follyfarm, therefore taking away the only assured income for the resident of the town at that time.

The ranches of the area, who had been doing their shopping at Follyfarm, could now travel to either Burns or Winnemucca within a day. The stores in those towns could offer far more than could a small grocery store at Follyfarm. Even the

occasional traveler, who once had to stop for gasoline, could fill up at Burns or Winnemucca and travel to the next town without a service stop.

A large part of the activity in both towns of Follyfarm was due to the business-like personalities that operated the towns. John Neal capitalized on the idea of building a town, then Tom Pollock moved the town to his land to realize adequate profits. After Pollock was murdered, the operation of the town fell into control of several different people, as his brothers were concentrating their activities elsewhere.

In 1944, "Shorty" Cummings moved to town and managed the remaining businesses until his death in 1956. His temperament was not conducive to business-like practices, so trade eventually trickled to nearly nothing during the period he was at Follyfarm. Even if he had been able to maintain the business, the town would be near death now, as the volume of traffic on Highway 78 is not enough to sustain an oasis.

Change is still going on in Sunrise Valley. In 1960, the Renwicks sold their holdings in the valley to Fred Pollock, who had established a successful cattle operation at the Juniper Ranch, the next ranch down the road, at the extreme north end of Alvord Valley. Since that time, Fred Pollock destroyed all of the remaining dilapidated buildings at both townsites. Now the only evidence of any settlement in the valley is the trees surrounding the site where the Big House once stood at the original Follyfarm and the remnants of rye hay fields with sagebrush encroaching on them. A few scraps of lumber and a new deep well and stock tank mark the remains of the second Follyfarm.

Electricity and telephone service came into the area during the early and middle 1960s. But in Sunrise Valley, the services are not needed. There are, at present, no signs of activity in Sunrise Valley, except perhaps a Hereford or two, or an occasional jackrabbit skirting between the clumps of sage, or the sand and dust that had originated from the old abandoned farm blowing with the winds sweeping down the slopes of Steens Mountain. The buildings had to be destroyed, as they were a hazard to any living thing- either man or beast- that may have sought their protection during a wind or snowstorm. Follyfarm is officially dead, except in the minds and hearts of the remaining few who were associated with the town. Follyfarm is not the only town in the region to die

because of the afore-mentioned causes. Several other towns, especially in the areas of heavy homestead concentration, were completely wiped out with the onset of the drought.

Other towns seriously felt the effects of the Taylor Grazing Act. Still other towns have felt or are feeling the effect of highway relocation. Many of the towns that gained in importance as regional shopping centers with the decrease in activity of smaller towns around them, are beginning to decline because people are travelling to larger centers to do their shopping. Towns that had grown because of railheads are declining as marketing centers because of the advent of cheap truck transport.

This has been a discussion on Follyfarm, Oregon, but if the names and some of the dates had been changed, it could well have been a discussion of any other dead or dying town in eastern Oregon. Towns like Andrews, Alberson, Fields, Blitzen, Catlow, Drewsey, Crane, Crowley, Creston, Diamond, Lawen, Princeton, Sod House, Voltage, Narrows, Rome, Jordan Valley, Vale, Nyssa, Burns, Hampton, Stauffer, Paisley, Silver Lake, Valley Falls, Lakeview, Fort Rock, and Coontown to name a few.

*~ written by Mary Neal Kueny ~*