

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #320 - Side A

Subject: Early History of Harney County

Place:

Date:

Interviewer: Marcus Haines

MARCUS HAINES: This is an early history presentation of our country here. And since we have some folks who will be viewing this slide presentation who aren't too well acquainted with the country, maybe we had better visit a little bit about it here. To start at the top of the map here at Burns, we go south, we come to The Narrows there in 26 miles, which crosses between Malheur Lake and Harney Lakes, it goes on up to Frenchglen which is known as Highway 205 now.

Off to the east of Frenchglen of course is Steens Mountain that we will be talking about. And then back to the right of Frenchglen is the dessert country that we will mention here. Coming back to the lakes there is a sand reef that separates Malheur and Harney Lakes which is just west of The Narrows, and that will be where we start our story. And we will start with another slide here of the lakes here, define it a little closer.

The sand reef that you will see in some of these pictures is on the east side of Harney Lake, and it was a ridge of sand all across there, and across the north side there that separated the two lakes back in the early history days.

And we will start our story here now with Peter Skene Ogden. He came here in 1826; he was a trapper for the Hudson Bay Company. And he came into Burns country and started trapping on the Silvies River along in the early fall of 1826, and he worked on down the river and ends up over at Harney Lake where we will start the show here.

At this area here, in this area here you will see Harney Lake, the white part of the picture here, it is white alkali now, it isn't water. But at that time it was full of water, and there was water right out directly in front of us here. Off to the left you can see Steens Mountain. And Peter Skene Ogden said that he arrived at this point here at sundown on the first day of November in 1826. And this is the first written evidence that we have of our country here.

He describes his citing here of two great lakes separated by a layer of sand, or a ridge of sand an acre in width, the lakes have no intercourse. Well this is the sand reef now that we were talking about, and he is over on the far end of it there looking toward us in this picture.

The sand reef is an interesting place to go. The sand is changing continually by the winds. In this particular instance here, you would think maybe a prehistoric monster had crawled up through here, but that's just frost and wind action that has caused that. Here is a plant that is nearly blown out, it's just barely surviving, and probably another year or so and it will be gone.

Here is a fence that was put in by the refuge in the early '60's, fencing the boundary of Harney Lake, and you will see they came through and put another fence right on top of it. The wind has covered it up with the sand here, making it necessary to reconstruct the fence right over the top of the present one, or the first one.

And here is a sign that tells you not to come down in here in your family car, because you might get in trouble in more ways than one here if you were to drive out in this area here that this sign is supposed to be explaining to you.

The lakebed of Harney Lake is covered with a dried alkali, and the wind comes up and it dries a little more, it keeps blowing away, and of course it deposits up in the sand

reef. And there is fresh water springs out on the lake, and this badger here has just been out getting a drink. And on his way back my old dog Butch stopped him and says, "By golly you think you're pretty tough, I think we'll just go you a round and see how tough you are." So Butch and the badger roll around awhile, and finally Butch says, "I guess you're just about as tough as you look, I think I'll just let you go on about your business," which he did.

When Peter Skene Ogden left here he was around the lake for three or four days. He goes out west toward Iron Mountain there, there is a little peak, and you can see Wagontire Mountain. He passes by the Double O Ranch, which belongs to the refuge now; it's their maintenance station or headquarters for the Double O part of the refuge. He goes on out through by Iron Mountain on his way to California where he wintered.

These are some of the sites that he probably saw. Maybe he saw these wild burros out near Wagontire. Or maybe he saw some wild horses that we're hearing so much about now running away from water holes, probably watering here at this lake at that time. And maybe he saw a sagehen, lots of sagehens out in that area. He is traveling south from Harney Lake remember. And maybe he saw these antelope, lots of antelope out there too. Well he comes back the following spring in June, and these are some of the flowers that he saw. This is called the Mulesear, kind of a sunflower arrangement, along with many others out there that is very similar. But this happens to be the Mulesear here. This is the Blue Penstemon, a real beautiful little plant. It takes quite a lot of moisture to grow. But it does grow in that area. And this is a Clarkia, if you will notice it has a very peculiar leaf design, you've never seen anything quite like it. Lots of them grow on the desert. And I understand that it was named by Lewis and Clark when they came through our country heading for the Pacific Ocean here at one time. Now

this is the hopsage, to most of us it's just greasewood. It grows all over the country here. And this happens to be a girl's foot in this picture here along with her tennis shoe. But these blossoms are of varied colors, and later in the spring they fall off and you have the old greasewood plant again.

This is the dwarf mimulus. It's a little low growing plant that doesn't require much soil. It likes rocky ground, and even gravelly ground. But it is a beautiful little plant, and has a nice fragrance.

This is the sagebrush aster. It's well named, it's growing right in the sagebrush. And this is the pincushion daisy. On good years, good moisture years on the desert, you see these most everywhere.

Now this is the bitterroot plant, and this is one of the foods for the Indians, they eat the roots of this plant. And it grows all over the country I guess. This plant here was the origin of the name for the Bitterroot Mountains in Montana that Lewis and Clark named. They must grow in there too quite well. And here is a nearby plant that is called the biscuit root. And if you were to dig this plant up, you would find a root on it that resembles a carrot, and it is relished by the Indians. They grind it up and made flour out of it.

This is the lobelia; a little plant that later in the summer when the lakebeds on the desert dry up, it will just, the lakebeds will be blue with this little plant. It has a very obnoxious odor.

This is a conglomerate of plants here, as you will well see. There is the Indian paintbush, and then you have a penstemon growing in there, a wild onion, and a little white flowers, I don't know just what they are. And some grasses, and right in the middle of the whole thing is a sage bush.

This is the larkspur plant, well named when you get up close by to the plant. You

will see the spur on the back of it. This is the plant that has probably killed more cattle than any other plant in Harney County. It is quite poisonous in the spring of the year.

These are the desert primrose, and known to a lot of us as sand lilies. They like to grow in the sand and it takes a real good moisture year as a rule to make them bloom. It takes so much moisture to open the seed I understand as they have a kind of a very intricate system of reproducing.

This is the wild onion, and those of you who have had the old milk cow feed on them when --- in the evening when you're milking, you don't know whether you are pulling onions or milking the cow. And when Ogden got up on what we call the Weed Lake Rim, he looked off there and he said, "Hey, there is Harney Lake, I was over on the other side of that last fall, the first of November, so I think I'll just go back down again." He probably didn't see the cattle coming up the hill though. So he did, and he sees this eagle's nest here on one of the cliffs. We call it the Eagle's Nest Cliff. And you can see the bird sitting in it there. And then here is, this is the young eaglet here. These are the golden eaglets, and they are identified by a brown patch on the back of their heads. If you will notice this fellow here is just starting to show a little.

Now we are dealing with another fellow here now in 1860, a Lieutenant Dixon. Now he was a topographical engineer, and he came in here with a company of soldiers under the command of Major Enoch Steen to survey a road from Eugene, Oregon through this country, and on over to Salt Lake City. Well they had an encounter with the Indians down around Harney Lake here, and so they stopped the surveying and run Indians for a while. So that when they left, they went right out on the sand reef that we have been speaking of to get over on the south side. You will see Steens Mountain in the distance, and Saddle Butte almost to the center of the picture.

So they head out across this way, and he said they didn't go far until they ran into a marsh that was just too muddy and difficult to travel, so they came back out in the brush and probably followed about the way 205 goes.

That is Jack Butte in the center of the picture there. It comes right on up and comes back to the refuge around this point here.

And this is just below Buena Vista. This is Rankin Crow's trademark, some of you folks will probably notice it, it's cut on the rim right above the road there before you get to Buena Vista. Rankin has put it there many years ago.

This is Buena Vista, and there is a lookout, an observation point on top of that hill there, and probably some of the members went up there to ... a little probably, and to look off to the east, and they are looking into Diamond Valley. But look at all the marsh land between Diamond Valley and there, so they said, "Well we don't want to get on Steens Mountain from that direction, we'll keep traveling south a little more." So they do, they head on up. The valley is starting to narrow here, this would be the Grain Camp.

And on up at this point the valley is nearly closed, and the Indian legend has it that the Paiutes and the Bannocks fought a great battle here and they closed Blitzen Valley with rocks and sagebrush and dirt during this battle. And it washed out again where the Blitzen River came through. See the Steens Mountain in the background there.

Traveling on up he sees the "P" Ranch trees and the end of the mountain there, but he still --- all this marsh land out here, he still can't get across on to this side of the mountain. So here he goes right through where Frenchglen is now.

Well we didn't stop to gas up here, but nevertheless this is the travel, his journey was right through here. Follow right around the foot of the hill, went through where the Jiggs Barn family lived, and he is back at the Blitzen River. And he says here that they

cross the river, it was called New River at the time, about a hundred yards below the gorge, or the opening of the valley, opening into the valley. And this picture was taken from the bridge there, so this is about where they crossed the Blitzen River and started up Steens Mountain.

Well of course they had never been on Steens before, he was the first White man to go on Steens as far as we know anyway. So he sees the Gunsite Pass there at the Kiger Gorge, and thinks well maybe that's the direction to go. So they kind of head off that way.

And here is a few of the things that he saw on the way up. This is a bullhead clover that grows on Steens, and probably many of you have seen it. This is the scarlet jensen, and it likes damp, excuse me, I mean scarlet gillia. The next plant is the pioneer violets, they like the damp ground. And I'm sure that most of you know what this is, this is skunk cabbage. And then this plant here is the Morning glory. The farmers don't care much for it when it gets into the grain and the alfalfa, but nevertheless it is around and it's a pretty little plant.

This is the hairbell plant here that grows along the stream banks. This is a real interesting plant here, it's called the bee plant, and if you'll look especially at the top of the plant you will see the bee's wings sticking up there. And as the plant matures I suppose more bees show up. In this case here, it's the formation of the leaves that cause this.

This is the service bush, blossom here and it has a butterfly on it. This is the Indian Paintbrush, and when you get up in the, among the alpine flowers you get a paler color to the paintbrush. As you know down on the desert paintbrush it is quite red, scarlet.

This is the crimson columbine. I think we see that around Fish Lake, I think that's where I got this picture. And this one here is the Salsify; it kind of resembles a diamond in

the sparkling, doesn't it?

This is the bluebonnet, known in our country around here as lupine. This is the purple, the dark purple variety. There is another variety that is almost blue, but they are all lupines, and there is lots of them all over the country.

Probably saw some of these deer too on his way up through there, the game. Here is some of the area that he covered going on up Steens Mountain. When he gets up to, this is the head of McCoy Creek, and he goes around the head of it there, still aiming for the Gunsite Pass that he has seen, and here it is. He finally got there, and when he gets there, he is a little disappointed because he doesn't think he is going to be interested in going out that way. So he walks up here, and he is looking off into the Kiger Gorge, and he knows he doesn't want to get down in there. So they turn south along the top of the mountain. And up around the 9,000-foot level, you find snow most anytime of the year. This was in August, the latter part of August that he was here. But he looks off down to the right, and here is a beautiful canyon. And this is the Little Blitzen here, kind of flows off to the west here. He looks around a little bit, and says hey I was there, there is Harney Lake. I was clear over on the other side of that not many days ago, on the north side. And here is this valley that we just came up through which of course would be the Blitzen Valley right down below us here. So they traveled south a little, and look over the mountain again trying to get down on the other side, and this is about all he can see. That's the Alvord Desert that you see there in the distance. So he looks the other way, back to the right, and here is another deep canyon. Well this happens to be the Big Indian, and it just about parallels the Blitzen. Those of you who have made the loop road will know that you went down off the end of Catlow Valley between these two canyons.

And he gets up here, and so I think this is about as far as we're going to go here.



We're about the top of the mountain, and there is another canyon over here that I see starting, and that would be the Little Indian. He looks out across the Catlow Valley, and here is Beatys Butte right at the center of the picture. And he --- back off to the right there is the edge, the start of Hart Mountain.

So they look back to the east again, and hey, here is a beautiful little lake. So this looks like we might have a place to get off. Well this turns out to be the Wildhorse Lake; most of you have seen that too.

Looking down the canyon here, it looks like there is a chance of getting down, so they do, they go right down this canyon. And Lieutenant Dixon said that it was the worst terrain that he had ever seen animals taken over. In fact they lost three pack mules getting down through there, from falling off of the cliffs and that.

They go out on the Alvord Desert for some reason or another, and nearly mired down. And instead of turning back, they were wanting to head back to the north toward the Malheur River, but anyway they went out, went clear out in this country here and made their swing back. And he wrote in his diary then, he said, "I have just traveled two hundred and fifty miles of the most worthless ground that I ever expect to see." He said, "Even the Indians are of the lowest intelligence." He said, "I hereby name the mountain that we have just crossed Steens Mountain in honor of my very energetic company commander, Major Enoch Steen." Apparently he didn't have too much respect for him.

Now we are back here in 1862, that was during the Civil War about, and we're in Wasco County. And if you will notice to the lower right of the name there, the two lakes there, that is Malheur and Harney Lakes. And Baker County now is where --- Baker County is where Malheur County should be.

Well then we have a Captain Currey in 1864 come through this country. Now

Captain Currey with an attachment of soldiers was coming through from over in the Owyhee country heading for The Dalles. He was traveling to the north, most all of these people have been traveling the other way that we have been talking about. But he is traveling to the north. So he comes over around the end of Steens Mountain on the north here and comes down to Malheur Lake on the south side. So he travels west, and here he comes up to what he says is a beautiful fresh water spring at the head of a marsh. Well this is the Sod House Spring that we are looking at, right in the center of the picture. That is where he came to. And this is the refuge headquarters now; it has been here since 1935. And this is the Sod House Lane going on out through the center of our picture.

And that was the meander line of Malheur Lake surveyed by a fellow name of Melbrum in 1877. I think he was surveying with one eye, and watching for the Indians with the other. Because there isn't one place in the lane that runs true east and west.

You look farther over and you see Harney Lake. And then right directly over Harney Lake is Iron Mountain, and back over to the right is Wagontire Mountain.

Well he said he went a quarter of a mile and he came on west, and he came to a sluggish river. Well that is the Blitzen River where it comes down and crosses under the road and goes off to the right on into Malheur Lake. So he takes up the lake, up the river here, about a half a days travel. And he finally fords a crossing up here; I don't know whether he made it at the Rockford here where all the pioneers used to cross with their wagons here in the earlier days. It was just an outcropping of lava here and they could drive right across here if the water wasn't too awfully high because they had a good solid bottom in it.

But anyway he forded the crossing here, whether it was here or a little farther

down, and heads back for the sand reef to come back to the southwest --- or northwest. And he hits another slough, ditch, river, whatever you want to call it. And they finally got across that, and during the crossing there they got caught in a quick lightening and thundershower. Somebody told him, "Captain Currey," he said, "you better call this lightening and thunder." "Well," he said, "I'll just call the other one we crossed lightening, and this one thunder, or Donner and Blitzen." And it turned out that Donner and Blitzen; these two streams are one in the same. So on this 15th day of June in 1864 Captain Currey named the Blitzen River.

Here we are in '65, it is three years later, and we're in Grant County now. And Baker County is still over where Malheur County should be. And there is no Lake County and Deschutes and a lot of them here.

But a fellow came in here with the pioneers along in the '70's by the name of Mart Brenton. In fact he homesteaded up here near the "P" Ranch. So he was down here at the sand reef in 1881 in May or June, he didn't remember which. And he said the water was real high. You're looking over on the Malheur Lake side of it here, and the water was all out through this brush and just ready to come over this reef here. So Mart said he took the toe of his boot and just started the water running across there in that sand. Well of course it didn't take long for it to cut a channel. And about the next thing we knew when we come back, well here is the channel that was cut. And it is estimated that the channel is fifty feet deep and real wide. And it joined the lakes up, and since that time there has been --- it has never been closed. It's been open, Malheur drains into Harney.

This is kind of the sites of the channel there that you would see from the sand reef. The sand reef is about in the center of the picture here. It's a real hard picture to show on account of the greasewood that is so high around in here. But this is another view of it

here. This is alkali in the bottom of the channel here. Here we are in 1893, now we've gotten into Harney County, which occurred in 1889, as most of you know. We have Malheur County too, but we don't have Deschutes, and I think there is some more. But they have, of course I think the west side of Cascades are pretty well divided up as they are today.

If you were to come down to the refuge headquarters here about 1970 this is what you would have seen. Now the parking lot has been changed down there, so it is a little bit different view than you would see here in this picture. But you'll see directly over this little house here in the front of the picture is the photographer's blind. And then this is the trees off here to the right at the old Springer place. And this was called, of course, the Sod House Spring. It is called now the Display Pond.

But moving to the left a little why you will find what remains of the old Sod House. And the story is on the board there in the middle, and there is a memorial there to Jewett and Finley, some fellows who were biologists here in past years.

But had you been here in the early '90's, this is what you would have seen. Now the house on the bank there is near where the photographer's blind was sitting, to lay down in the edge of the water. And that was the first post office in this whole area. It was called Springer, and it was established in 1889. Over where the trees were, the very edge of the picture there is the first schoolhouse. And if you will notice to the very edge of the right, just above the spring you see the roof of a house there. This belonged to Pete French out in here, and that is the house that he built there, right at the head of the spring.

Move on over here is the old Sod House. It is being used for a barn now. It was built in here in the early '60's by some trappers. The first building I guess was ---

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