

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #384 - Side A

Subject: Bruce Crespin on Oregon Trails

Date: March 20, 1992

Place: Historical Society Luncheon - Burns, Oregon

Interviewer: Dorothea Purdy

(Note: Sound quality on this tape is very poor, and hard to understand. Mr. Crespin is too far from the microphone, so can't pick up all of what he is saying.)

DOROTHEA PURDY: This is Dorothea Purdy, and today we're going to be listening to Bruce Crespin at the Historical Society Luncheon. The date is March 20th, 1992. Held at the Silver Sage Restaurant in Burns, Oregon. Bruce will be talking about the Oregon Trail; since this is the, 1992 will be the Oregon Trail Centennial. He is going to be bringing us up on some of the Oregon Trails, and how they connect with some of the things that they did, and places that they went.

BRUCE CRESPIN: ... the historical analysis that it is all new. And so to a certain extent I'm also asthmatic this week, and I won't be speaking as much as I have been known to. So --- you can record if you want, but you can make arrangements ...

...

In general, I'm presuming that most people who have been in Oregon for a while are somewhat familiar with the Oregon Trail, and those who are in Harney County for sometime are somewhat familiar with cow trails going through our county. And so with that premise, some of what I'll say is of necessity, some will ... I'm going to talk a little bit about the cow trail, and then follow it up with the source of activities and events that the

BLM and some of the associated entities who are involved in it over the next year or so.

As you probably are somewhat aware, the sesquicentennial or 150th anniversary for the Oregon Trail proper is scheduled for 1993. There is a lot of events associated with that, some of which with my agency are the grand opening of the ... Hill facility up in Baker City on Memorial Day weekend of this year, 1992.

And another event, in another sense though, a lot of the things that we do, whether it is along the road, at specific localities, or state presence on ... we'll have something to do with the Oregon Trail.

In this area we had no Oregon Trail proper. The Oregon Trail, the first folks that had come through from the Midwest ... train at the general area of Parma, going north along the Columbia River to The Dalles, and back again on the Oregon Trail. In 1842 the first folks came to the Willamette Valley. For the next few years there was quite a bit of folks getting in, organizing ... trains and coming across the country and going on what became known as the beaten path to the Oregon Trail up the Columbia River.

In 1845 a group of sojourners decided at the town of Fort ... well Fort ... which is near the present day Parma, that a character named Stephen Meeks, who was about 40 years old at the time, had been across the newest part of Oregon a few times, and he purported to know his way. And he proposed to lead some folks, not on the beaten path up the Columbia River, but across this part of Oregon to cut off the, you know a lot of time, as well as to not going the hardship which was in The Dalles downstream, a river float. So he proposed to take people over the, to not go over the worst part of the Blue Mountains, and to get over to the Willamette Valley this way.

Well as it turns out, most people that came across on the Oregon Trail worked for the ... they weren't disenfranchised folks; most of them were rural farmers. Those who could afford to ... to come across did, so you can see you'd have to have some land and

be looking for new opportunities on the west coast, and to be in Oregon, to come across. Well Fort Boise and --- we'll be using some diaries from several of the folks who were actually on the train, the Meeks or Lost Wagon Train. Some things were in conflict, but in general the story is the same amongst the diaries. There might be a few points of reference to folks who studied this more than I ... so Helen, don't say that today. (Laughter)

But in effect there is something mentioning it, a lot of folks followed the ... and the western portions of Harney County, and the eastern most portions of Lake County. Well according to the things that I have been reading, approximately 10 wagons, supporting 10 families, and probably five bucks per wagon to come this way, to take the cut-off. When they did, the approximate location of Vale, on the Malheur River, they came across and took this cut-off, actually departed from that beaten path.

As they came through, I've showed on this map pretty much where they entered the BLM Burns District ... as well as what is known as Harney County there. Up in the upper right you see Beulah Reservoir, and above that Castle Rock. On August 31st, of 1845, those folks were at Castle Rock according to diaries. Then they started working their way, this was a red line, (referring to map) and I guess it is a red line, but it shows up within --- I'm going backwards now, going right this way, right through ... what we're talking about today.

We noted on, as soon as they'd left the vicinity of Castle Rock that the road was extremely rocky, was extremely rough. They were breaking wagons all the time. People that were sick got worse. And those are the things that are rather vivid in the diaries, excerpts that we have. The folks followed them from Castle Rock area into the Cottonwood Creek area, near the Cottonwood Reservoir, came by what is today the Altnow Ranch, north of Drewsey. Came through the way of Drewsey, this is not all in one

day, for sure. Came through the city of Drewsey, and went on down through Pine Creek, came through east of Harney, and down into the area, just below the county around here, north of Malheur Lake. They constantly were in sight of, or ... the rocky area that we are talking about, where they had been breaking a lot of wagons. I think we know that ... northern edge of the Stinkingwater Mountains there. Folks that go there, from their vehicles or walking aren't far from a rock at any point in time. In fact there are some places there where all day they were picking rocks out of the way and the wagons wheels would go creaking and groaning over rocks all day, even though they were removing the rocks on their way.

The whole time they were seeing, and noting in their diaries as they were in sight of the Cascades, and that made them feel good about themselves. Well they were seeing Steens Mountain, and they couldn't possibly be seeing the Cascades. So at any rate these were ... that they were trying to relate to in terms of thinking where they were, and they'd made certain amounts of progress. And as they come down into this Harney Valley, they're noting that the grass was ... it was real tall. They get down to the edge of Malheur Lake on September 7th, and ... they had problems with water.

Their --- diary experts talk about, you know, a lot of good grass, but real poor water. And then they're working their way essentially out towards the Double O area, out by the Silver Lake area, and they find decent water out there and real good grass. Well we know today that those places are very much like that. The route that we have traced through the Silver Lake area goes through part of the county, where in fact there is abundant water, a lot of Indian archaeological sites, and generally productive resources. So for that leg of the journey they really didn't know how well off they had it. Approximately the middle of September they were coming over here to the vicinity of Wagontire Mountain, crossing over to Lake County from Harney County, present day.

And due to the fact that they were simply running out of water, primarily, they ended up camped for several days at a place called Lost Creek, and Lost Creek Springs, which really screamed ... the quality around that vicinity.

Then we leave here, the north part of Wagontire Mountain where these folks started to get bottled up. There was no one; they knew they should go, because they couldn't be certain of having enough water to survive. And they were starting to get pretty nervous, because in fact they are running out of other provisions as well. Having been out to those places myself there is abundant spring water. So water --- if you can stay there, isn't that much of a ... Water for lots of livestock and lots of people to depend upon water for cooking, and cleaning, and drinking, as well as for most of their livestock, could be a real problem, and so they couldn't stay much longer because they were in fact running out of other provisions.

WOMAN: ... at this point.

BRUCE: Yes.

WOMAN: Okay.

BRUCE: One of the diaries is from Bend, ... in the Willamette. I'm not so sure but the Parkers. There are several folks ... and names like ... Parker, and Millican, from which I am sure the town was named. But in any event, some folks think he's gone, and if he were around he'd certainly enjoy hanging them.

WOMAN: ...

BRUCE: ... and so in fact he was, according to this one diary, ... the folks ... Well as it turns out his, some various experts talk about other trains, one called the Samuel ... train, and some others from ... diaries.

When they got through Vale, or even when they ... at Fort Boise, they had heard about Meeks taking this short cut. So when they hit Vale they said hum, it looks good to

us too, let's follow Meeks ... in country where wagons had never crossed. So we hear ultimately of a 100 wagons, 2,000 people, lots of livestock, hundreds of sheep, and oxen, and cows.

They were also backing up at Lost Creeks Springs, because they followed each other out there. And the first ... while people kept piling in every day. And so pretty soon it went from a ... to a small padre of folks, to a lot of people. And so in desperation they felt as much ... The lack of water, and they were running out of provisions, so essentially they ... while all these others followed him that way and ...

The good thing was they didn't ... wagons. But ... As it turns out, they ultimately found real good water at the headwaters of the Crooked River. And so the guides and folks, who had been out looking forever, came back and let everybody know that there was in fact good viable water, more than they would need, and a passage. And so they headed from this Lost Creek area, probably on the west side of Glass Buttes, but that's not really pertinent. ... Crooked River headwaters, and eventually made their way out by Alfalfa, and Redmond, and out at The Dalles. But this part of the trail, I'm giving the name of the Lost Wagon Trail, the Meeks Wagon Train, the real forward story was in fact this week that they spent with all those wagons and people at these springs out here.

Again having been out there, there is nice ... water, real picturesque spaces, homesteads, ... abandoned, but were occupied such ... And you can see how it would be real attractive to go there, but also looks almost the same in every direction once you get a good vantage point. And I could see how, if you didn't know where you were going, you ... not for sure which way to go. The drainages simply don't follow the way you would like them to.

Well the diary talks about Meeks having been involved in hunting trips and expeditions in the Bend to the ... area, which is about 25 miles due west of here. So he

had been that far. So folks that are looking into these pertinent things, and are in effect historians, think Meeks did know where he was, did know where he was going.

Often those wagon trains, people would vote and decide whether or not the guide knew what he was doing, whether or not they would go the way they wanted him to go. And that's probably one of the reasons this thing bogged down the way it was.

The subsequent effort to use the same general route, the Elijah Elliott train, was ... came approximately the same way. They went south of the Malheur ... system, as opposed to the ... came by, essentially down through here. But even some folks from this county, a few who have ancestors who were on that train, and as I understand it, they come back to be ... Harney County.

In any event though the Elijah Elliott train, although it made it further, got stranded over the Deschutes River country, and ultimately had to be saved by folks who provided them with the water, provisions. They weren't running out of water, they were running out of food. And that was five years later.

Finally, I believe 1854, is it Helen? William Mason led the first successful trip that came through, generally the same route, and made it all the way over to the Willamette Valley, and they were in fact successful, so they knew it could be done.

Some of the things that this points out to this part of the state being settled, are probably that folks weren't real anxious ... came through, you know, during wagon train time ... Meeks Cut-off Train. So it's probably one of the ... to come back to that part of the trip. You know, a place where they thought they were going to die, and they thought they run out of food and water. And so it's natural when you're in the Willamette Valley to even consider ... to that part of the state.

So as you can tell, when this part of the state was settled, the general highway routes and the main corridor from Central Oregon over to Boise is in fact Highway 20,

which is in the most part real similar to the routes that were taken.

One thing in particular as far as some of these ways of dealing with these pictures though, the BLM and the Historic Society in Harney County, and the Oregon Department of Transportation, ... Council, are working to put various historical roadside markers as you've probably seen throughout the county. There is only two in this country, one is out at Buchanan, which marks the ... one is out by Riley, which talks about the Bannock Wars. But that kind of wooden sign will have some good history on it. It is planned to be placed at several places along these ... routes. We'll be working at the ... showing where you are on the trail. Probably as, maybe five locations in the county, one out by Buchanan, ... Highway 78, certainly one down by The Narrows, over by Highway 395. ... Highway 20 again. That will be a good local monument, and testimony to the fact that this occurred here. We didn't know ...

The High Desert Museum over in Bend is putting together an exhibit on the Lost Wagon Train. Now the perception ... per se, ... but primarily a most dramatic chapter in Oregon history that will have big displays, I think, running in the fall if not toward winter. It will last for several months, with large ... and a lot of good exhibits dealing with this Cut-Off Trail. And we're working with them to rush that out as well.

At our state fair this year the BLM is putting together an exhibit on the Oregon Trail, where there is primary emphasis on the Cut-Off Trail, especially this Lost Wagon Train Trail, the Meeks Cut-Off.

And I guess I didn't answer some questions. I've got some maps here that are real good scale, as opposed to this. This just shows monuments and places, like Castle Rock, the Lakes, Glass Buttes, things that you folks will recognize, and see generally the kind of places that they had to go on this Lost Wagon Train, Meeks Cut-Off. But I do have some larger maps, U.S.G.S. ... which shows closely we can determine from several diaries



pretty much where the trail went in much more detail. They have dates on this, as probable campsites, and ... this Lost Creek area, and the ... because that's where a lot of this colorful and perhaps dramatic part of the history took place. Is there any questions?

ESTHER DAMMON: ...

BRUCE: One thing that I thought was noteworthy in reading the diaries, ... discussions, native people, Indians are mentioned here and there, but this area was real productive, and we had large native populations. And in the 1820's, 1822 and I think to 1826, throughout the west there were major epidemics of smallpox and malaria were decimating a lot of the pioneer populations, but definitely affecting the Indian population. Whether it was Central California all the way up through this part of Oregon, those epidemics essentially wiped out massive populations such as burial practices that were previously used, they ... have the people or the energy to carry them out. There was a lot of mass burials, possibly some ... at Malheur Lake gives evidence to that. But in general it's noteworthy that they didn't see a lot of Indian people because this is 20 years after the major epidemics. And it's probably one of the ... Another question, sir?

BILL CRAMER: ...

BRUCE: I see this area called ... leave early enough in the year to really get some of the ... The fact that there is water in Malheur Lake ... is not as dry as we, from what little I can tell was the ... today. So ... real low, so yeah I don't know ... when you have that many livestock, and that many wagons to ... use a lot of water.

BILL: ...

BRUCE: Yeah, something like that. They, 200 wagons, and a lot of people backing up there where the springs were ... lack of abundant water. Now they've got enough water out there to survive, and they ... but with that many wagons, and that much livestock and people who already said, yeah, it's kind of a bad place to stop.

HELEN COWAN: ...

BRUCE: Possibly some I haven't read yet. Most of the ones that I'm looking at are either ... it wasn't a bad day. So others on the very same day saying they had to dig rocks out of every darn hollow we came to, and there is a lot of talk about the height of grass, and the ... water, and how many wagons broke, and who they went to bury, or the fact they had to bury somebody. In fact "Packwood" baby was buried near Malheur Lake area ... Most people that died along this route, it wasn't from thirst ... some sort of illness or epidemic they contracted themselves. But there is very little mention of nature, except for how ... or economic stuff like how much water and grass there might be.

HELEN: ...

BRUCE: They brought a lot of stuff with them. As livestock, you know, they weren't going to leave their livestock, because that was one of their mainstays when they got to the Willamette, they'd need them to ... They'd need them for, you know, whatever economic enterprises they found. So then at the end of their journey --- But the livestock had a hard time pulling the wagons up rocky mountains without water to ... So if they were about to die, they'd slaughter those and eat them. And that's one thing that's in there. It appears that a lot of things they were eating were provisions they brought. I'm sure that's not true, I'm sure that ...

HELEN: ...

BRUCE: They might have, Helen, you know, when they were in Eastern Oregon. And I'm not sure they would eat deer. Whether or not they would be able to spend their time fishing or not, I don't know. There was ... Arlie.

ARLIE OSTER: How did you get a hold of those journals ...

BRUCE: Well gosh; I was in your safe. (Laughter)

ARLIE: ...

BRUCE: ... shouldn't have had this conversation. Our senior archaeologist, historical staff ... in our state office, have been working with folks ... Bob Boyd at the High Desert Museum, who is in charge of putting together this ... exhibit. And between the two of them, ... Bob Boyd ... have rooted out these diaries. Some of the ones they have are Xeroxed transcriptions. People had diaries, people that they knew that were friends of theirs, 20 and 50 years later, ... years later, wanted to make some notes on that diary, so they would type out a transcript. In some cases the original was lost, and the typed transcripts are all that are left. So I'm not exactly sure where they got these all, but they're all either transcribed and typed. One set of references I have is actually a printed book, ... Oregon Trail ...

I have a copy of this ... of diaries and things that I ... give to Helen Davis because she has been working on these, to peruse and to use as she can. And certainly there is not a ... Society wanted to make some more copies, they could. You know, some of this stuff is kind of lengthy, but in general it is ... If there was some need from the Society or somebody else, they could make some use of these, and probably arrange ... find some way to duplicate them.

DON CAIN: ...

BRUCE: I don't ... together. It may not be a complete set of all the diaries available. What it is they seem to be primary diaries from folks that were oriented towards describing everything along the way, ... useful for them. And generally what we have here ...

DON CAIN: ...

BRUCE: I'm familiar with the book, I'm not familiar with the ...

ALICE SHEPARD: ...

MAN: ...

BRUCE: We must have ... various parts of the state today. I'm not really sure of the

process ...

MAN: I'd recommend that book ...

WOMAN: ...

MAN: ...

BRUCE: The book is called The Terrible Trail, and it is one thing I haven't mentioned. ... There is a place called the Blue Bucket Creek, ... on the Malheur River, which had no relationship evidently to ... the Blue Bucket Mine along the way. Evidently when they ... Lost Creek and looking for a place to ... Some of the folks --- evidently what they concluded is that the Blue Bucket Mine released the ore, the rocks that were picked up and put in a blue bucket, it was somewhere up in this country. In other words, north of Glass Buttes, and in that ... neck of the woods. It's a large area. Evidently blue buckets were real common at that time, they weren't special buckets, but it was a special ore. These people were rural farmers coming to the west, they weren't miners. So they had ... and thought they were going to die, and if they had a bucket of rocks, the important thing was finding water and moving on. When they got to their destination, someone noticed --- I guess they, some of the diaries mentioned that some of the rocks were pounded on the wagon floor, that they were taking them out and ... on the wagon ... mention of any mineralogy.

So when they got to the end of the trail and they saw what they were worth, people realized they were gold ore, and they realized it must have been in that particular, general ... But you probably know to date no one has ever relocated it. ... some of the things ... if somebody did, because then it would eliminate the mystery, and make it less of an intrigue.

I guess one other note is that when these folks finally made it to The Dalles, where there was a mission, they were rather appalled that, the fact that they were almost out of

provisions, or out of provisions, and rather sick and near death, and it just prevailed on the ... pass that didn't pan out. When they got to The Dalles where there was food, and water, and folks ... they were met with missionary person who wanted ... And according to the things I've got here, they said they didn't want any ... they wanted their livestock. And to further their value, up front, for things like sugar and flour and ... that were terribly high priced ... in value. They were finally ... of that ... and made it out of "wilderness" because they were ... exactly what they would have liked. Are there any other ... Yes Mam.

WOMAN: ...

BRUCE: The ones that stayed were buried. Many ... people died coming through in various places. The Oregon Trail has been likened to the longest linear cemetery in the world. Because in fact it is punctuated by people having to discard keepsakes, bury loved ones, and that sort of things. Although ... would have stayed on this particular route, ... nobody anticipated or decided to make a go of it.

WOMAN: ...

BRUCE: Presumably those people went to The Dalles and floated down to the Willamette Valley. The only ones that I know ... Elliott Trail, I mean Train, ... to this one. There were some folks that came back to this area ... That thing wasn't successful either, but they ... by the Deschutes Basin, so ...

MAN: ...

BRUCE: That's where ... It wasn't successful in ... pretty much straight across.

MAN: ...

BRUCE: It might have been ... made the venture without a lot of ... Again they didn't realize how far ... from Vale. They didn't realize how little water there might be. And again, it might have been another dry year. And they didn't start ... They ran into ...

successful one. As ... a couple times without, you know, ... a bunch of wagons. And they in fact did leave early enough, but maybe ...

WOMAN: ...

BRUCE: ... We've got maps for that. I haven't focused that much on ... pick them up today. But we've got a decent map that shows just ... By the time we were going up towards Beulah and Castle Rock ...

WOMAN: ...

BRUCE: ...

WOMAN: ...

BRUCE: They say from that pass, we could get a --- the best thing about that is you ... what would have been a days journey ...

WOMAN: ...

MAN: ...

BRUCE: I think ... jump off point for taking this cut-off.

WOMAN: ...

BRUCE: ... This part of the county, well I shouldn't say that, BLM management in Harney County, we haven't got any on record, while we do see other road building up ... it's possible that up in the Drewsey country, north of, well north of the Altnow Ranch, and out towards that Castle Rock country, which you might well find --- if these folks had initially, you know, ... wagon, moving rock all day, still very rocky. That would leave a scar, that would leave a place where you would see rocks and ... and everything. You might have ... but you'd probably see past it, so it would match up with leaving Castle Rock and ... over there. ... So I would think that, while we are sure of any ... in that part of the country. ... mostly having to do with all those rocks. And that's just in these diaries. Now the 190 or so wagons that decided to follow them to ... probably had to move rocks and ... too.

They were probably all; they also were following in their path. I would mention the first place where you can actually see, half of the piece of the on ...

WOMAN: ...

BRUCE: ... You can see them many places up above ... And so, I guess not. I would think they got them on delays when you were --- and you know, real fine soils ... But some of those ... and especially in moving rocks and things, we might still have, you know, pieces of it.

MAN: ...

BRUCE: ...

MAN: ...

BRUCE: Yeah, that might well be true. Yeah, ...

MAN: ...

BRUCE: Are there any questions. Well one thing you folks can look forward to, if you do go to the state fair, the BLM ... some ... interpretations as well as the High Desert Museum which you will definitely be some good exhibits bearing on this very route, focusing on this part of the region where that ... dramatic, near death ... took place. And we'll probably see over the next year these highway road signs. ... we're planning on elaborating ... putting siding on it, putting together some kind of Bird Ridge and maybe maps, and having the state ... So over the next few years the only celebration will not be simply a, major places like ... and for the primary trail ... can also be this cut-off route ... Looks like a pretty good deal at the time. And I guess maybe no more questions, thank you. (Applause)

If any of you folks want to look at some of these maps, come on, and people ...

(END OF TAPE)

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