

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #42 - Side B

Subject: Early Travel Through Harney County

Date: December 16, 1977

Place: Harney County Historical Society Luncheon

Interviewer: Marcus Haines

MARCUS HAINES: ... Harney County, and it was due to the efforts of a fellow name of Antoine Sylvaile who was sent in here to scout by Peter Skene Ogden for ... There's no written, there is no written record, but he's the first fellow that reports about the lakes, and the Silvies River was later named after him. ... sounded like a French name.

Then in 1826, in October, Peter Skene Ogden, who was the trapper in charge of tracking for the Hudson Bay Company came through here from the north and camped right in here near Burns. And they tried to catch beaver out in here, but they didn't find too many. And they had quite a time providing. And he said that, in one place there, that they had six meals in ten days. That would take care of me pretty quick, you know. (Laughter)

They were kind of glad to get out of here. And he said that the country was inhabited by the Snake Indians and he said he saw an Indian every ten yards in any direction he went. He said he didn't realize there could be so many. And there were lots of times they starved in here. And speaking of naming the Snake Indians, from what I can read, it included all the tribes around in this general area, not just in this country here.

But when you read some of these --- well like in Bancroft's book here ... copy that has been donated to us. It seemed like somebody, the soldiers were always chasing the

Snake Indians here. They kept them, tried to keep them on the move so that they were aware of the people around. But there were all kinds of Snake Indians, but it turned out that there were Paiutes and others here too. Of course we have the Paiute Reservation here now.

But anyway, he stayed here until along in November, and then he started out and they only caught 30 some beaver, and I think that he said that they caught one, killed one bear, a little black bear, and the rest of the time they lived on what beavers they killed, they trapped. So they didn't trap too well, and they got out of here.

Well the next fellow to come through was John Work. Now he was listed as a trader with Hudson Bay Company, and he comes in from the south. And I read two accounts of how they think he comes in here. He came in here in June of that year ---

WOMAN: When was that?

MARCUS: 1831. And this Professor Clark who interpreted some of these diaries, I have them here, that was presented in evidence in the case here between the state and the federal government over the ownership of Malheur Lake back in 1931. He says that he came in through Catlow Valley and over Jack Mountain, and came down over the south side of Harney Lake. But I read another account here not long ago, that he came in from the other side and was never over around Harney Lake on the south side. So you just have to take your chances on that one. But in any rate he was in here, just kind of passing through, went on out north. But he was trading with the Indians some, and was doing some trapping. And apparently they had, the year he came in he had good luck catching beavers here along in June. When you think Roy Heinz, the city of Burns, probably wasn't primed then, but he said they were. (Laughter) But they caught a lot of them, a hundred thirty some just as fast as they got through here in the spring of 1931, 1831. Then the following year they come, in 1832, he came back through here

again. And there isn't too much that I can find out about that trip, other than he passed through this country, and he was going south this time, going back down toward Nevada to find ...

But then the next ... report that all the lakes were full of water, and there was just waterfowl everywhere. But the big game doesn't seem to be too plentiful in this area during these times. We hear about the buffalo and all that was in here. We know they were here, because the skulls have been found. But none of these people reports ever seeing any of them. So prior to this time, I suppose, that he was in here, that these buffalo were present and in this country.

Because here in 1931 when they surveyed Malheur Lake, and it was dry right down to the mouth of the river, they were farming around there, they pulled out buffalo, and bear, and wolf, and four or five different types of skulls out of the mud ...

MAN: We've got some of them up there in the museum.

MARCUS: Yes, some of them are up there in the museum. And probably what happened there, the Indians were probably camped at the Sod House Spring there and kept ... got down, trying to get into the water, and mired down in the mud, and perished in the mud is probably what happened.

Well the next report that we have is the Meeks Wagon Train. And you folks who are interested in this particular story, you can get a book up here at the Library, I'm sure it's called the "Terrible Trail". It's Meeks Wagon Trail in 18--- Cutoff Trail of 1845. And according to what we read here --- he started through here with 200 wagons, covered wagons, and about 750 stock. He had never been in this country, this Stephen Meeks, but he thought he knew it pretty well. And by working around north here, and we'll start here when he comes into the valley. And he was so impressed with Harney Valley, which was just the first days in September, that they spent ten days right out in the valley here,

what we call Harney Valley now. The soil was ... and lots of grass, and plenty of water. And then they ended up down, and camped on Harney Lake when, see they were going west. And while they were camped there that night, the Indians stole ten head of horses from them, and a little girl died of whooping cough. And she was buried out along side of Harney Lake, right out here ... and buried here ... you'll find the grave.

So they, instead of swinging back north here, he took them out here to Wagontire Mountain, and by gosh there they suffered a lot of hardships. There was no water, and they spent days getting back out of there. I think the ... they were going to hang Meeks, and come near to doing it. And they finally worked back and got him on the Crooked River, along the Deschutes, and on down to The Dalles then. And the train, of course, there was no Oregon Trail, just ... those people that they split off from were in the Willamette Valley and well settled before these folks ever got there. But anyway, most of them got in.

But then the next people that showed up here, that we'll talk about, is the Elliott Train. And they came through here in 1853, and as near --- they estimate there were from a thousand to two thousand people in that train. Now that's quite a bunch of people just to be ... And they followed Meeks's road that he made there, well it would be eight years previous, in '45. And they followed him until they got into the valley here, and then they lost his tracks for some reason or another. And Elliott was supposed to be acquainted enough with the country to get these people through. He had been to the Willamette Valley, passed through here from the north, and met this train ... brought them through.

Now the Willamette Valley people had started the roads, and had completed it for that matter, up the middle fork of the Willamette River. Well these people got into the Bend country, Three Sisters there, and they worked their way over and go down the

Willamette, that was the route that he had expected to take. But they got confused when he got in here, and so they got out in the valley here, and finally decided to leave. Why some of them said, "Well we ought to go on the south side of Malheur Lake." And one fellow name of Miller, probably a relative of yours, Jerry, he said, "No," he said, "I'm going to go on this side, this is the way Meeks went, and he went out through this country here. And he didn't go clear around the end of Malheur Lake, and around on the other side to get there." So he takes off and travels for a couple days and finds that he is all alone. He thought maybe some of the other wagons would follow him. And then he was afraid of the Indians, so he come around and he took after the train.

And they went around Harney, around the east end of Malheur Lake, around, and they tell about coming to the Sod House Spring. Well there they were, they got there, they couldn't cross the Blitzen River, it was know as the ... River, or the Tule River I guess it was then. And they took ... as the river left the Rock Ford Lane, which is about 10 miles south, and down on the Rock Ford, and across, and then he came back, helped him get around The Narrows, and get back to almost where he started.

So he ended up, got ... couldn't get through, so the whole crew had to go around Harney Lake. And then they come back up and went over here to Wright's Point and were five miles from where they started. They spent five days getting around, making this loop around here.

But the interesting part of this ... year, we were talking about it, is that in this trial that the state and federal government had, and this qualifying statement Rye Smyth who lived in Happy Valley, and the Indians burnt up a couple of his relatives, testifies. He was born in 1844, and he was in that wagon train and remembers crossing the Blitzen River and through there, only 9 years old. And in this, in this article here he said that they had what they called boat wagons, they were water tight, and they come to these streams why

they just pull the wagon off in there and have a team cross. They'd take a rope and hook onto the wagon and boat it across, and then pull the running gears out and put it back on and away they go. Said that's the way they crossed the Blitzen River there, and ... slough. They ended up going through, up around through there too. But he remembers, he remembers that part of the trip.

Well they ended up out here pretty much toward the Wagontire country, but not quite as far south. They tried swinging back, and got back over on Crooked River, and then got the Deschutes there. Then after awhile they finally got --- they contacted this group that was coming out from the west, and got over the mountain.

Now if you folks have who have your ... Oregon Historical Society quarterly here, this story is being run as a serial in it. And the article is by ... I guess it is, and Lowell Tiller. And Lowell Tiller is one of the authors along with a fellow by the name of Clark of the Meeks Cut-Off Trail. Now it's real interesting. And this article here is in the September issue, and it's all about travel through Harney County here. So it will probably be at the Library here before long ... in the back room. But anyway, that's the story here.

And some of these people --- they sent a group of eight ahead here, they were running out of provisions, and they sent them out a horseback, and they made that route. Poked around over here, and come back over here right where they started from. And they went on to get help; they saw what they were kind of up against.

And I have this fellow's diary, a fellow by the name of McClure, this diary that I have. There are several diaries on this trip, these folks ... but the one I have is by McClure. ... introduce some evidence here, they were trying to determine the water levels around Malheur Lake, and that's the reason they were using these old diaries for that purpose.

Well they run out of provisions, and finally ... killed Sagehen one night, and that's

what the eight of them had for supper. They had a little flour to make gravy, and had Sagehen for supper. So they finally got real desperate and got back over here this side of Silver Creek, and they killed a little Indian pony that they had, and they ate him and dried the meat there, the best they could, and went on. But those folks suffered a lot of hardships too.

But as a train, those two trips there are the things that have made Harney County the last frontier. Now people stayed out of here after hearing about these experiences. The military came through, but of course they were fixed up for anything that might happen. But the settlers stayed out of here. Rye Smyth came back in 1872 then, and he remembered enough to that he came back with his father here, and they settled out here by where the Hines Mill is now ... I guess the hot spring is still there. But it, anyway that's where they spent two winters. And the snow got real deep the second winter they were here, and they were about to lose their stock. And they found Happy Valley out here, there wasn't any snow in there, and they moved in. And that's how they got, aptly named that particular area Happy Valley, because they were so happy to get in there.

But the settling didn't start until in the '70's. And of course the last Indian uprising was 1878, that came right through our country here. So we've had a lot of early history here, and we have a lot of later history too.

And it's interesting to see how things happened here, as far as the eastern part of the state, or ... eastern part of the state. See we got our statehood in 1859. And not until about 1860, or '78, or after the Civil War, they didn't know there was a place over here in Eastern Oregon, the people over in the Willamette Valley didn't. Sometimes we wonder if they know it yet. (Laughter)

Well that's about all I have to offer here. And if there is any questions that I might answer, why ...

... (Mixed conversations)

(END OF TAPE)

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