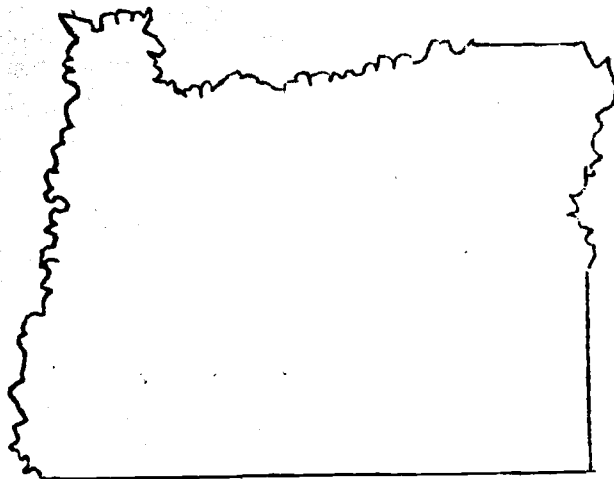


OREGON ODDITIES

and

ITEMS OF INTEREST



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WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION OF OREGON
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The items in this bulletin, selected from the material compiled by the Federal Writers' Project and the Historical Records Survey of the Works Progress Administration, are representative of the significant collections being made by these nation-wide programs.

The Historical Records Survey is inventorying all sources of early Oregon history, including county and state records, church archives, historic cemeteries, old manuscripts and imprints, old printing presses, monuments and relics, private diaries, letters, and memoirs, historic buildings, and Indian records and lore.

The chief undertaking of the Federal Writers' Project has been the American Guide Series of books. In Oregon as in all other states the work includes the state Guide, designed to acquaint Americans with America and to present to the visitor the history, industry, recreational advantages and scenic attractions of the state. The Oregon Guide, now in the final stages of editing will soon be added to the list of those already published which includes Idaho: A Guide in Word and Picture; Maine: A Guide "Down East"; Massachusetts: A Guide to its Places and People; New Hampshire: A Guide to the Granite State; Washington: City and Capital; Philadelphia: A Guide to the Birthplace of a Nation.

Flatboats manned by an Indian crew were used for freight and passenger service in Oregon until after 1850.

During the 60's and 70's when river transportation was at its height on the Willamette river an experiment was tried in which oxen on a treadmill powered the boat. It worked well enough downstream but the oxen could not furnish motive power enough to return the craft.

It is recorded that the river boat captains had to pay the Indians in cash, because they considered valueless the gold dust offered them.

One of the first captains operating flatboats on the Willamette and Yamhill rivers had a long tin horn which was blown by a leather-lunged member of the crew to announce arrivals.

The first steamer to operate on Oregon Territory waterways was the Beaver, built in 1835 in England, and owned by William Armitt, secretary to the Hudson's Bay Company. The first steamer to be built in Oregon, the Columbia, a clumsy double-ender resembling a ferry boat, made her maiden trip on July 4, 1850, up the Willamette from Astoria, where she was built. It required twenty-six hours for the run from Astoria to Oregon City. Due to the crowd, one passenger, after having paid two ounces of gold dust for passage from Astoria to Portland, was forced to sleep on the upper deck. The fare was \$25 a head or a ton.

After the steamer, Lot Whitcomb, which was launched on Christmas Day in the same year, began its regular run the following spring, rates were reduced. The machinery used in the Lot Whitcomb was of French make, shipped from New Orleans, and assembled by Jacob Kamm at a salary of \$400 a month. He became engineer of the steamer and J. C. Ainsworth, captain, at \$300 a month. Both men were later identified with Oregon's famous transportation monopoly, The Oregon Steam Navigation Company.

The first big excursion from the pioneer towns of Oregon City, Milwaukie and Portland was made by the Lot Whitcomb to the Cascades on May 30, returning the next day. Passage was "\$25 for a gentleman and lady".

"The ferry boat used in crossing the Willamette at this place, is propelled by mules---sometimes. Yesterday morning

these hybrids waited until the boat was out in the stream and then ceased to revolve the wheels. No other motive power being in use on the craft she fell down the river a mile or so before the mules returned to their duty. From this accident the U. S. Mail was detained for an hour beyond its usual time."--Portland Oregonian, March 11, 1861.

Indians with straps about their heads to which lines were attached, furnished power for pulling the cars on the first railroad constructed in Coos county. Later, when a locomotive was secured for the line, it lacked sufficient power to haul the traffic load, and passengers were frequently requisitioned to help push the train over the summit.

This first Coos county railroad, only two and a half miles in length, connected the head of Beaver slough on the south and Isthmus inlet on the north with water transportation which was available at each terminus. Besides handling freight and passengers this line hauled logs from Coaledo to Isthmus inlet. Logs were used for a road bed with strap iron surface for rails. Crude as it was, the railroad was a great improvement over transportation by human carrier, the natives having been so used by the pioneers who transported goods from the south to the Coos bay area.

Tree stumps in the streets of the pioneer village of Portland were responsible for considerable early day comment. Captain H. M. Knighton, founder of St. Helens, prophesied it would become the metropolis of Oregon because it was situated on high ground at the confluence of the Willamette and Columbia rivers and was at the end of the Indian trail leading from the Willamette valley. He pointed to Portland's streets in derision and called the rival village Little Stump Town. Some claimed that Portland had "more stumps than people."

Enterprising merchants of the town accepted Knighton's remark as a challenge. They determined to corner Willamette valley trade. They set about removing the stumps from Canyon road, substituted corduroy, invited the Tualatin valley farmers to shop in Portland, and induced the ship lanes to make Portland the terminus of the San Francisco runs.

Portland's stumps also figured in the news when the Willamette flooded the town in the early 1860's. Residents used row boats for transportation. Ordinarily stumps were visible and pedestrians or horsemen avoided them. During the flood they were submerged and greatly impeded navigation.

It was said of "Whispering" Thompson, a legendary figure of the Umatilla country, that his ordinary conversational voice thundered across two counties.

J. G. "Whispering" Thompson, the best mule skinner east of the Cascades, distinguished himself as a freighter in the 70's and 80's. Each of the fourteen mules in his team understood every word he addressed to them, and responded at once, not only to the jerk-line, but to the persuasion of pebbles which Thompson carried in a bucket on the seat beside him and which he threw with unerring aim. His familiar cry, "Gee-e-e-e-, Nig!" was recognized by old timers as a signal that Whispering Thompson was somewhere within a three-mile radius.

"When Whispering Thompson was leaving Meacham on top of the Blue Mountains, you could hear his voice calling to that mule team clear in La Grande," declared Fred Andrews, now living south of Echo. Others say when Thompson was gently urging his mule-drawn caravan of covered wagons to leave Umatilla Landing, his voice, louder than any steamboat whistle ever heard bellying on the Columbia, could be heard in Pendleton. He was opposed to monopolies, detested railroads, and often held heated discussions with himself on these subjects. When asked why he talked to himself, he replied that he liked "to talk to a smart man once in a while."

One time he wagered that he could turn a fourteen-mule team in the intersection of Main and Court streets in Pendleton, and won the bet. After Thompson retired from freighting and settled on a farm north of Echo, Thomas G. Smith worked for him. Whispering would put his head out the kitchen window and call instructions to Smith a mile and a half away. Smith declares that he heard every word.

In the East Oregonian, March 12, 1881, was a personal: "Whispering Thompson made his first trip of the spring season to Pendleton the other day. He warbles to 'Nig' as sweetly as ever."

A few months later this item appeared: "Last Wednesday the flute-like voice of Whispering Thompson could be heard about two miles; we went to see what was the matter and found his 14-mule team in front of a pretty good house which was moved about a fourth of a mile in about four hours--Thompson gently encouraging the mules."

J. G. "Whispering" Thompson was born on the island of Nantucket, date unknown. Thomas G. Smith believes that he died about 1890 and was buried in the Echo cemetery, but a diligent search by Mr. Smith failed to reveal his grave, as apparently no marker was placed there.

"Buddy, can you spare a dime?" might well have been the query of many a pioneer maid of The Dalles as she clung to the arm of her escort at the foot of Union street in the early 1860's. James S. Reynolds had been given a franchise to build a toll sidewalk from the foot of Union street to the boat landing on the Columbia river. Having built it, Reynolds collected a dime for each person who used the walk. Residents were given the choice of paying the dime and walking dry shod to the dock or withholding the money and wallowing through the mud of the street. Oregon weather aided in the success of the venture by keeping the lowlands deep in mire.

A wagon, now owned by E. F. Russel of Sweet Home, is reported to have been in continuous use from 1852, when as a covered wagon it came across the plains to Oregon. In 1925 it was reluctantly released from service. A few parts had been renewed, but the wagon remained much as it had been the day Oliver H. Russel arrived in Oregon where he settled in the Sweet Home district.

A ferry figured in a bill of sale filed April 29, 1862, in which Wallace Cushman sold to Burns and Smith for \$4000 by quit claim deed, "all his right, title, etc., in a parcel of land in Wasco county, consisting of 160 acres of land and ferry on the John Day river where the road from The Dalles to Walla Walla crossed the stream, together with all hereditments except two feather beds and bedding together with my Ferry Boat on said river...etc."

December 5, 1849, Robert Moore and John McLoughlin made application to the county court to keep a ferry across the Willamette river "To and from Oregon and Linn Cities." A court order established the rates and bound sponsors in the sum of \$500. Linn City was washed away by the flood of 1861. Moore ran a newspaper and was supposed to be McLoughlin's ally when he was involved in controversy with Americans and missionaries.

October 5, 1846, John Switzler was authorized to keep a ferry across the Columbia river opposite Fort Vancouver for five years. His license for the first year was fifteen dollars. Switzler was authorized to charge the following rates:

- Footman, 25¢
- Horseman, 75¢
- One wagon with yoke of oxen or team, \$3.00
- Horse or cattle, each 25¢
- Sheep or hog, 12½¢
- 100 pounds freight, 25¢

A news item in the Mountaineer, October 26, 1867, entitled "Freight Rate High", reports a scarcity of prairie schooners and an advance of freight rates between The Dalles and Canyon City to 8¢ a pound. It was estimated that there were 200 tons of goods stored at The Dalles awaiting movement into Grant county.

Following transportation by ox team and previous to the use of railroads, travel into and out of the state was by stagecoach and steamship. When President Hayes visited Oregon he chose to come by stagecoach.

Driving stagecoaches over the rugged highways of pioneer Oregon required great skill. "A fine esprit de corps was one of the outstanding characteristics of the craft, which attained nearly to the dignity of a profession by reason of its devotion to its calling. The hardships of the business were enormous...."

The Oregon and California railway did not complete its connection with the rail line south of the state boundary until December, 1887. Prior to that date the mails between the upper Willamette and Umpqua valleys and California and the east were carried by way of Yreka, over an

approximate route established by fur traders and Indians a century ago.

Connection by rail with the east over the Northern Pacific in 1883 and the Oregon Short Line in 1884 made heavy inroads on the California stages, and the main line was discontinued when the rail line to the south was established. As a feeder for the railroad, however, stages continued until nearly the beginning of the present century.

So slow was stage transportation in winter that it took four days to make the trip between Ashland and Portland in comparatively good weather. It was said that a good walker might out-travel the stagecoach.

The first stages were ordinary "dead axe" wagons, these later being succeeded by the picturesque coaches slung on leather braces to give them a rocking motion. They were capable of carrying seven or eight passengers, but frequently carried as many as could crowd into them. The seat beside the driver was strictly avoided.

The stage driver worked seven days a week. His usual run was about 40 miles and return, with new horses. Travelling was a miserable business unless the trip was short and the weather good.

By ignoring the need for sleep it was possible to go from Jacksonville to Portland in three days and nights.

On September 2, 1872, an ordinance was passed to establish a ferry across the Willamette river between 7th street in Oregon City and the opposite shore on the land claim of the late Hugh Burns. On this site Burns founded Multnomah City, a town that has disappeared. The ferry was to be leased for one year to a responsible person who would pay the highest price. Proceeds were to apply to the support of the common schools in Oregon City.

According to a news item in the Klamath Republican, August 18, 1900, the number of heavily loaded freight wagons that arrived and departed were considered a barometer of the county's business. "At least a dozen trains, each of three wagons carrying 8,000 to 10,000 pounds, drawn by six horses, arrive each day."
