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OREGON
Continued from Page 1

Oregon's southeastern corner, which exemplifies those qualities Oregonians are so proud of.

That southeastern corner, roughly the region south of U.S. Highway 20 from Riley east to the Idaho border and east of U.S. Highway 395 from Riley south to the California border, contains the most isolated of Oregon's communities, as well as the state's most desolate stretches of land.

Aptly called Oregon's "Big Country" by Bend geographer and author Raymond Halton, this region has nearly as many square miles as people. It includes all of Harney County, Oregon's largest and least populated, with 10,228 square miles and only 7,100 residents.

It is a region mostly unaffected by human intervention, where vast stretches of sagebrush-covered mountains, valleys and prairies stretch beyond the horizon, and where the harsh climate reigns almost unchallenged by man's attempts to control it.

Here, the problems of the "big cities," as even modest-sized Eugene, Salem and Portland are called by the locals, are almost unheard of. There is little crime, pollution or traffic.

But what may be even more conspicuously absent from Oregon's southeastern corner is rain. Whereas average annual precipitation reaches more than 100 inches in parts of the Coast Range, and is typically between 35-45 inches in the Willamette Valley, few areas of the southeastern region receive more than 15 inches. The Alvord Desert, an ancient lake bed completely devoid of any vegetation that is reminiscent of Utah's Bonneville Salt Flats, is Oregon's driest spot, averaging only seven inches of precipitation per year.

Southeastern Oregon is also a region of dramatic temperature extremes. Because the Cascade mountains block much of the moisture and mild winds blowing inland from the Pacific Ocean, the eastern two-thirds of the state is generally hotter in the summer and colder in the winter than on the west side of the mountains.

Summer temperatures above 100 degrees are common in Oregon's Big Country, as is below zero weather in the winter months.

And unlike the Willamette Valley, southeastern Oregon is a region dominated by distances. The few population centers, Lakeview, Burns and Ontario, are located far apart and on the region's fringes. There is no such thing as a quick trip to town throughout most of the southeastern corner; the vast gulfs of open space have turned even the tiniest communities into social and commercial hubs.

Southeastern Oregon is also the home



The post office general store (below) is the commercial and social center for Frenchglen, population 10. The tiny town is the gateway to Steens Mountain in southeastern Oregon.



of Crane High School, one of the country's few boarding high schools. Crane's students — most of them live on the isolated ranches scattered throughout the region — come from an area more than one hundred miles long. Because of the long distances from their homes to the school, students stay in dormitories during the school week and return home only on weekends.

There is a conspicuous sense of friend-

liness throughout Oregon's Big Country not found in most cities. Most locals passed on the thousands of miles of lonely roads make a point of waving, almost as if they feel a need to properly greet the few people they do encounter.

Although the history of human settlement in southeastern Oregon contains its share of broken dreams and heartbreak, the residents of today seem to be at peace with the nature they have tamed just

enough to plant permanent roots. Few express any discontent with their chiefly solitary lives. Instead, they praise the virtues of the region and its lack of people, pollution and — for those accustomed to the wetter environs of western Oregon — its lack of rain.

In many ways, Oregon's southeastern corner is one of the country's few remaining pockets of the "Old West." This is still very much cowboy country, where the most important industry is livestock ranching. Buckaroos still herd cattle on horses, often driving them right down the middle of the area's few major highways on the way to winter or summer pastures, although pickup trucks with gun racks and CB radio antennas have mostly replaced the other symbols of a century ago.

But perhaps the overriding feeling of Oregon's "Big Country" is its sense of space. Here it is possible to drive 50 miles without passing a single dwelling. This is the home of wild animals more than it is of people.

If fact, it is likely that the visitor will see more species of animals and birds than people. The region is home to thousands of mule deer and pronghorn antelope. Although the sagebrush desert seems desolate, it is home to countless species of small animals, birds and reptiles.

Here the yips and yowls of the coyote, probably the most widespread animal in

the region, are more often heard than the noise from cars and other man-made sources. This is truly the wildest corner of Oregon.

Even the land forms are different from the rest of the state. Although Oregon's southeastern corner has been — like much of the state — created mostly through the explosive forces of volcanism and the erosive forces of wind, water and ice, the geologic process of faulting has pushed and pulled the land here into forms unique to Oregon.

Steens Mountain, at 9,670 feet southeastern Oregon's highest point, was created by one of these faults, which fractured the earth's crust and pushed up a block of the crust, forming the mountain. These fault-block mountains are found throughout the region, and along with the valleys that often form between them make up what geologists call the Basin and Range, a region that includes most of Nevada and Utah and parts of other southwestern states.

Yet for all its rugged terrain and harsh climate, Oregon's southeastern corner is a land for exploring and for explorers who aren't afraid to veer off the beaten path, in some instances a long way off.

And whether the visitor enjoys the region enough to return, Oregon's Big Country seldom fails to be at least impressive, and often awe-inspiring, to those who experience it.

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