

On Oregon Trail

30,000 may have died

by MICHAEL P. JONES
Post Correspondent

It is believed by some historians that 30,000 or more emigrants who attempted to reach a lush paradise known as the Willamette Valley are buried along the Oregon Trail, mostly in unmarked graves.

For over 20 years, beginning in 1841, the tide of emigration brought hundreds of thousands from Missouri to the fertile wilderness valley known as the Willamette. With visions of creating a new life for themselves and their families deep in the heart of the Oregon Territory, they abandoned or sold homes and worldly possessions, and struck out for the unknown.

The 2,000-mile trek from Independence, Mo., took up to a year and was

dangerous and always unpredictable.

Depending on the condition of the trail and the weather, at a breakneck speed they could average anywhere from six to 10 miles per day. When this was the case, the journey would only take between four to six months.

At times the slow-moving emigrant wagon trains crept through hostile Indian Territory, the Indians resenting the metal plows the pioneers carried with them. The wild land they once knew was destined to be changed. Its soil was tamed to nurture the strange new seeds of the settlers.

Most of the dangers along the trail were caused by the elements, or were brought on by the hardships of the journey.

Diseases, such as measles and small pox, were brought into the ter-

ritory by the early fur traders, and rendered the tribes of Western Oregon helpless against the invasion of the coming pioneers.

Most of the tribes had been reduced to mere handfuls. In some cases entire tribes fell to extinction as a result of white men's diseases.

As the pioneers pushed through the hazardous desert and into treacherous mountainous regions, death took its toll along the way, striking both young and old alike.

Thousands perished. One historian estimates that from 1841 to 1859, 30,000 or more died en route to the new land of plenty.

If this is true, stretching from the Missouri River to the Willamette River, on the average, there would be one grave every 100 yards of the Trail.

Dedication ceremony held

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Daughters of the American Revolution officially dedicated the grave.

In a ceremony alongside the old emigrant trail they placed a bronze plaque, mounted on a small rock by the grave, so passers-by could pay their respects. The unknown pioneer woman had become a symbol of the forgotten and courageous, who contributed with their lives to the settling of the west.

A few years later someone stole the marker from the isolated gravesite.

On the afternoon of Aug. 23, 46 years after the first dedication, the DAR and a host of supporters came together with a large crowd of descendants from the Barlow Trail pioneers, and replaced the stolen marker with another. This one was fastened to a large and

seemingly unmovable boulder.

Clare Belsher of Portland, the chairperson of the DAR's historical marker committee and the organizer of the rededication ceremony, brought together a large crowd of supporters and well-wishers.

Participants in the festivities included representatives from the Forest Service, the Sandy Pioneer Association, the National Parks Service, the Wasco County Historical Society, Multnomah District No. 14 Garden Club, the Oregon State Federation of Garden Clubs, the Barlow Trail Long Rifles, the Sons and Daughters of the Oregon Pioneers, Sons of the American Revolution, the Wasco County Pioneer Association, local Boy Scout Troops numbers 173 (of Sandy) and 662 (of

Hoodland), the Clackamas County Historical Society and the Jackknife-Zion-Horseheaven Historical Society.

Bing Beckman, the fire management officer of the Zig Zag Ranger District, opened the ceremonies. He is a member of the Barlow Trail Long Rifles.

Clutching a musket and dressed in clothing representative of the pioneer period, Beckman walked a short distance of the old trail to the grave, where respects for the unknown woman were paid.

Covering the marker, prior to the dedication, was a feather-stitched wool quilt, which was carried during the long trek over the Barlow Trail in 1845.

The quilt was on loan from the DAR's "Robert

Newell House Museum" in Champeog. It was made by Irene Goodrich Zumwalt,

who was born on March 17, 1831 in Ripley County, Indiana.

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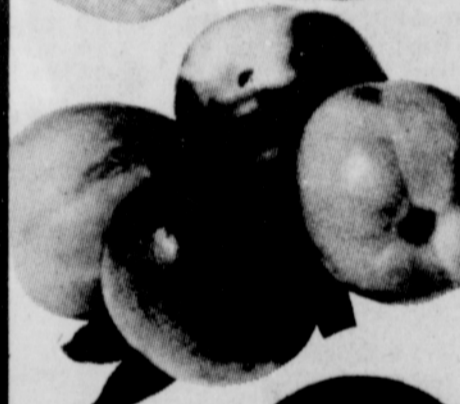
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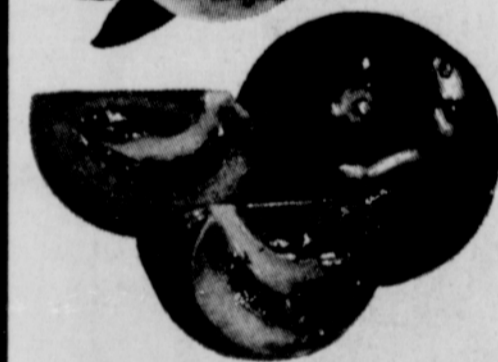


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