



Offbeat Oregon History: Oregon trail's Eden

By Finn JD John
For The Sentinel

Driving through the Grand Ronde Valley today, you likely wouldn't see it as a Garden of Eden.

It's nice, of course; the scenery is beautiful, with the Willows looming to the northeast and the Blue Mountains to the west. In the spring, it's lush and green and lovely. But still, you probably wouldn't call it an Earthly paradise.

Unless, of course, it was 1845 and you were on the Oregon Trail. The Grand Ronde Valley is, basically, an oasis, a tiny postage stamp of fertile green tucked into a very large expanse of relatively barren lands — lands that were very hard to live on back in the 1800s. The valley is only about 15 miles wide by 35 long, more or less centered around the modern towns of La Grande and Island City. It's well watered by the Grand Ronde River, and in the 1840s it was covered with grasslands offering plentiful forage for grazing animals; so deer and "elk" (Wapiti) were in particular abundance.

It must have been a truly welcome sight for parties of emigrants, more than one of which likely made it to the valley just in time to avoid starvation and disaster (as did the Astorian overland party in 1811, all of whom would surely have starved to death had the valley not existed). By the time an emigrant party had made it to the Grande Ronde Valley, it had straggled across hundreds of miles of the Great Plains, crossed the Continental Divide in Wyoming and thrashed through hundreds more miles of the Rocky Mountains and the blistering, arid Snake River Desert in Idaho — a total of some 1,800 miles if it started from Independence, Mo., as most early parties did. Depending on the year, it might also have had to fend off attacks by hostile groups of Native Americans.

So by the time a party got to this tiny, fertile valley, it was typically pretty played-out.

This was even more applicable to the animals than the people. After all, the people could rest when they needed to, sitting on the

wagon while the oxen dragged it up yet another mountain pass. But those oxen — when they got skinny from lack of forage, unhealthy from lack of rest and exhausted from too much work, nothing the emigrants could give them on the trail would help them recover. What they needed was a month on good grass with no load. They needed to be pastured. They needed to rest.

And that's where the Native Americans in the Grand Ronde Valley could help ... for a fee.

The Nez Pierce, Cayuse, Walla Walla and Umatilla tribes had no use for oxen, except maybe for the occasional bad winter when better meats were unavailable. But they quickly figured out that they could make a lot of money on them.

So when an emigrant party would straggle gratefully into the little valley, its members would find the friendly faces of tribe members there to greet them — with an offer they couldn't really refuse: "Give us two of your underfed, exhausted, played-out oxen, and we'll give you one of our fat, happy, well-fed, ready-to-work models. Then we'll sell you a second healthy, well-fed ox for whatever we can shake you down for, and you'll be ready to take on the next 300 mountainous miles between here and Oregon City."

It was the Oregon Trail's one and only used-oxen dealership. The tribe members would turn the two "trade-in" cows loose on the grasslands to graze and rest; by the time the next year's emigrants arrived, they'd be tanned, rested and ready to finish their journey, pulling a new emigrant's wagon.

Of course, nobody was forcing anyone to take this deal. Emigrants were free to keep their skinny, exhausted animals if they wanted, or to stay in the valley long enough to get them back into working order. But to do that, they'd have to plan a long stay in the valley — a month or more. And that would mean winter might catch them crossing the Blue Mountains or the Cascades, which was not a pleasant thing to contemplate.

It was a classic win-win situation. Emigrant parties whose livestock would never have pulled through got a fresh set, and tribes got a nice source of trade goods, plus a supply of emergency food for the winter.

With the demand for their inventory, the Native Americans could charge almost anything they liked for their fresh oxen; the wonder isn't that they marked them up 100 percent, but that they didn't mark them up more. Of course, that didn't stop some of the emigrants grumbling about it.

"The Nez Pierce can beat a Yankee peddler in a trade," one exasperated — and out-of-pocket — emigrant grouched.



PHOTO COURTESY FINN JD JOHN

An 1869 painting by Albert Bierstadt shows a scene from the Oregon Trail, most likely in the Rockies. (Image: Boca Raton Museum)

Dr. Fuhrman: Junk food and children's health



By Dr. Joel Fuhrman
For The Sentinel

There is a clear impact of nutrition on the potential development of Alzheimer's disease and other late-life cognitive disorders. Green vegetables, berries and other plant foods reduce risk, whereas animal products and processed foods increase risk. However, the damaging effects of unhealthy foods on the brain occur throughout life. Research now suggests that the typical American childhood diet including burgers, pasta, pizza, chicken nuggets, French fries, processed sweetened cold cereals, sweets and soda negatively affects school performance and learning. Overall math performance in the U.S. lags far behind many other developed nations, and it is likely that the nutrient-poor American diet is a significant contributing factor.

We as parents are strongly committed to supporting our children's academic achievement. We want the best for our children, and we take an active interest in their schooling; we do everything we can to make sure that they will be well educated and able to compete as working adults in our increasingly technological world. However, how many parents think about the impact of the foods they give their children on their academic performance?

Early childhood:

Parents must give their children's brains the right raw materials with which to learn — and start early. Breast milk provides a DHA-rich foundation for a healthy brain, and when solid foods are added, their nutritional quality is of paramount importance for the brain's continued development. Several studies have now found that dietary patterns in early childhood affect IQ scores years later. In one study, greater consumption of fruits and vegetables upon introducing solid foods was associated with higher IQ and better memory skills at four years of age. Similarly, in another study, children who regularly ate cookies, chocolate, other sweets, soda and chips during the first two years of life showed decreased IQ at age eight compared to children who did not eat these foods. Nutrition during this formative period has a meaningful long-term effect, providing building blocks to construct the growing brain. The brain is highly susceptible to oxidative stress, so a healthful, antioxidant-rich diet is especially beneficial for the brain and is likely involved in this link between natural plant foods and higher IQ scores.

Teenage years:

Young children who are fed processed, nutrient-poor foods are likely to become unhealthy teenagers and eventually unhealthy adults. Now 23 percent of teens in the U.S. are prediabetic or diabetic, 22 percent have high or borderline high LDL cholesterol levels, and 14 percent have hypertension or prehypertension.

A recent study tested cognitive abilities and performed brain MRIs on teens with and without metabolic syndrome, a combination of

at least three diet-related metabolic abnormalities among a list including insulin resistance, high triglycerides and hypertension. The teens with metabolic syndrome had lower spelling and math scores, lower IQs and reduced attention span. Their brain MRIs showed a smaller hippocampus, especially in those with insulin resistance — extremely important since the hippocampus is a part of the brain involved in learning new information. This means that our American obesity promoting, diabetic promoting diet actually can cause parts of the brain to shrink. The researchers concluded that insulin resistance and other components of the metabolic syndrome, as a result of a poor diet, may impair teenagers' academic performance, and maybe even their learning abilities throughout their lifetime.

The time to feed your children healthfully is now. A diet rich in greens, berries, other fruits and vegetables, beans, nuts and seeds is the only way to ensure that children get the array of phytochemicals, antioxidants, fatty acids and other micronutrients to adequately supply their growing and constantly learning brains. Junk food is not for kids.

Dr. Fuhrman is the #1 New York Times bestselling author of Eat to Live and Super Immunity, and a board certified family physician specializing in lifestyle and nutritional medicine. Visit his informative website at DrFuhrman.com.

•CORRECTION•

A September 12 article entitled "Sunday Dinner" incorrectly named Sharon Jean's husband as Ron Jean, not Ron Rice. The Sentinel regrets the error.

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