

A trip to Pete French country

Story and photos By **MAKENZIE WHITTLE** • The Bulletin

Eastern Oregon is beautiful in a desolate kind of way. Since spring break still looks different this year and flying to a warm beach is probably still out, head to where social distancing comes easy in the wild sagebrush landscapes of Harney County — and learn a little about the notorious cattle baron Peter “Pete” French along the way.

THE MAN

John William French was born in 1849 in Missouri, after which his family moved to California, where patriarch Marian French started a sheep farm.

As John grew, he struck out on his own and got a job as a horse wrangler for rancher Hugh James Glenn. French was short in stature and weighed only about 125 pounds, but he proved himself a capable horseman, even learning Spanish from the vaqueros (Spanish-speaking cowboys, from which the word “buckaroo” came) in Glenn’s employ.

French was promoted to foreman and entrusted with 1,200 heads of cattle to move to the Blitzen River Valley near the Steens Mountain in southeastern Oregon, where land use and open grazing was more open than California after the U.S. Army had forced the Paiute and Bannock tribes onto reservations. He, along with six vaqueros and a cook, made their way north eventually buying a few more cows from a prospector along with his land and the “P” brand, starting French’s P-Ranch.

THE P-RANCH

Today, towering cottonwood trees make a nice respite from the miles of sagebrush in one direction and the marshy landscapes on the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge to the north.

Located just outside of Frenchglen, the P-Ranch still bears the chimney of the old house here as well as its foundation and a French creation in the long barn.

The barn, which is now on the National Register of Historic Places, used to house hay during the 1880s on the ranch. French, though a shrewd businessman, was also quite the innovator for his day. He is the first rancher in the basin to raise hay to hold over during hard winters for his cattle mixing the Texas “open range” style of ranching with the European stock farming techniques, according to interpretive signage at the barn.

Today, the 150-foot barn has been partially restored in order to keep it standing and safe to walk in, but the feeling the juniper-beamed barn leaves you with is still potent, driving you back to those early ranching days in the basin.

French’s empire and climb to become a



The Sod House Ranch as seen from the Center Patrol Road at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. **BELOW:** A great horned owl in its nest at the Pete French Round Barn.

cattle baron began here at the P-Ranch and with Glenn’s financial backing and partnership, French set out to acquire and buy more land from early settlers to the region, some through honest transactions, some through corrosion, manipulation of land use laws of the time and intimidation.

THE ROUND BARN

French grew the herd and spread over 140,000 acres of land, making in good years over \$100,000 in sales — about \$2.5 million today.

After Glenn died, French was named president of the French-Glenn Livestock Company and he set about establishing various sites as base camps and structures around his land to better keep an eye on and maintain his holdings.

One of the more remarkable structures were round barns with only one example remaining today, a spectacular example of this style of architecture.

The Pete French Round Barn State Heritage Site is located along the lonely stretch of Diamond Craters Road on the back slope of Steens Mountain.

Not a barn in a traditional sense, the Round Barn is an enclosed corral consisting of an inner and outer section divided by a stone wall.

Cowboys working for French would train teams of horses and mules to pull freight

wagons in the outer circle while foaling mares could be tended to in the inner circle under the grand, umbrella-like roof.

The center is held up by a single juniper post with a cone-like hub at the top where spokes spire from it. On a recent visit, two nesting great horned owls had made a temporary home in the hub.

When you visit, enter the barn slowly and check for any owls or other raptors who may be resting above. If you see any, stay quiet and give them their space.

For French, owls were the least of his worries.



THE SOD HOUSE RANCH

French purchased land and the Sod House Ranch from A.H. Robbie in 1877 near the shores of Malheur Lake.

The Sod House Ranch is one of the rarer parts of the structures from the Pete French era still standing in that it’s only open for a few months of the year, August through October, after various bird species have finished nesting.

But you can still see the old ranch from the Center Patrol Road at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.

The refuge preserves the ranch and is slowly restoring the buildings that remain.

One of the most intact 1880s ranches in southern Oregon, it hosts original struc-

tures including the main house, bunkhouse and a long barn, though a different style from its southern neighbor.

END OF THE LINE

By the 1880s more settlers began arriving in the basin looking to homestead and with water and land at a premium and French being the top of the proverbial food chain, tensions began running hot between him and settlers.

One settler named Edward Oliver, with whom French had disputes over land and water rights in the past, wanted an easement to drive cattle through French’s land instead of running them six miles out of the way to avoid trespassing.

On Dec. 26, 1897, when Oliver rode through French’s land, the two had a heated argument. Specifics vary but French was unarmed and when he turned away Oliver shot him in the back of the head.

Oliver was tried in the murder, but growing hostilities toward French in the county brought the jury to acquit him on the grounds of self-defense.

French’s name is now Eastern Oregon legend and much of his land has since been acquired by the federal government in order to create and expand the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.

For one of the most successful and infamous cattle ranchers in U.S. history, his 25 years in the Blitzen valley can still be remembered in the places left standing after his meteoric tenure.

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