

THE SKY LOVE SIGN

A Story of Central Oregon

By Ice Franklin

CHAPTER I

Eastern Oregon is a vast undeveloped empire of possibilities yet unmeasured. It comprises two-thirds of the total area of the state with less than one-third of the population. It is the largest area on the Pacific Coast still retaining distinct marks of the old order. In the central and southern portions are vast stretches of unredeemed land still in the virgin state. These vast stretches of arid plains and valleys, barren hills and narrow river gorges, sparsely covered with sagebrush, bunchgrass and patches of juniper, still untouched in many places by the white man's civilization, find many "newcomers" easy victims of its wild witchery -- the spell of the wild!

As many another young man seeking adventure and new opportunities, William Bonham, a "newcomer" from Tennessee, was lured into this section of the West. The country was far more sparsely settled then than now, for no rail road had yet built into the interior. However the new twin railroads -- the Hill and Harriman systems, that now tap this section so well known in earlier days as a cattle country, were then grading their right-of-ways up the great Deschutes Canyon, the only feasible route to the isolated interior. The first night he slept in his blankets on the bare ground with the wonderful sky for a roof and miles of crisp pure air to fill his lungs and make his blood tingle with new life and energy. Tho tired from the journey the fascination of this strange, new land was too great for sleep. For an hour or more he gazed up at the brilliant stars, studying the beautiful constellations set in the clear, pale-blue dome of the universe and watched the Milky Way slowly turn, as it seemed, with the rotation of the earth. Finally the cool night breeze, laden with the perfume of the sagebrush plains, soothed the young emigrant to sleep.

In the early hours of morning he suddenly awoke. He heard the strange, wild bark of the coyote that sounded much like the heart-rending cry of a child at night. The strange sounds aroused him so thoroughly that he lay for some time wide awake. The banding blue above had moved westward till new constellations were visible. In the low eastern sky he discovered a figure that he did not remember having seen before. It was a beautiful group consisting of five brilliant stars arranged in almost perfect symmetry. A row of three prominent stars close together and almost perpendicular, but with uniform intervals between, formed the center. Opposite the three stars to the north and south, at greater distances, but at equal distances again, were the other two bright stars. The figure was in the position of the early morning sun and was slightly tilted toward the earth at the southern end. Having noted carefully the exact location and characteristics of the new constellation, the Southerner once more drifted into a sound slumber. When he awoke again the birds were singing on the plains and the distant mountains to the west were veiled in a soft, pensive haze. On the eastern horizon the new day's sun was bursting into view in a wealth of golden hues. The enchantment of that September morn on Shaniko Plains captured him. The spell of the wild roused the primordial instinct and he loved its excitement.

After breakfast at the hotel the Tennesseean left the little branch line railroad terminus for the heart of the interior by stage.

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The emigrant had good stuff in him and in four years he became a hardened pioneer. And four years had wrought a gradual but surprising change in his life. He had a homestead, and had become very much of an "old-timer" himself.

His new home, "Dixie Ranch," was situated on a narrow plateau bounded on the south by a high ridge and on the north by a sheer rimrock precipice that dropped abruptly down to the steep slope running to the edge of the little valley below. The unobstructed view from the high elevation always inspired him. The power of that subtle witchery that had captured him on Shaniko Plains had never left him, and had grown stronger with the years. Every evening when he was at home he would walk out to the rimrock near his cabin to watch the sun set behind the snow-capped Cascade Mountains. He would sit with his feet hanging over the perpendicular, eighty-foot rock wall and watch the day die and dream his dreams. The twilight hour held a peculiar fascination for him. And he never tired of the pretty sight of level alfalfa fields in the narrow, peaceful valley seven hundred feet below, the barren buttes and ridges to the north and north-west and the evergreen junipers on the great plateau of the Deschutes Valley to the west, with the majestic Cascades in the background. But always in the autumn he would look for his favorite figure in the night sky before going in. Even through the cold winter months and early spring-time he would look for the pretty constellation always before retiring, for he had learned to believe in it as an omen of good fortune -- the sign of constancy in friendship and love. And after watching the sign for four long years it did bring him good fortune. A greater change than had been wrought in that time was to effect his life in as many weeks.

A nervy, winsome city girl had taken the school in the district where the young pioneer lived. When school began he was sixty miles away on the "fall ride." But his employer sold out his cattle soon after the ride began, so he found himself homeward bound earlier than usual. It had rained the day before and the air was more fresh and pure than common. It was recess in the morning when he passed over the last hill and came in sight of the schoolhouse. A

scene was presented to his eager gaze that seemed too good to be true. On the road the day before he had met "Shorty", the stage driver, who had given such a glowing account of the "new schoolmarm" that he refused to believe it till he could see with his own eyes. And he could hardly believe his own eyes!

As the rider approached the schoolhouse his heart pounded his ribs harder and harder. Now, the Southerner had a good strong heart, but the sight of that winsome, laughing girl playing with a half dozen kids on the school ground was a plenty to cause his hungry heart to flutter. As he rode by the girl stopped her playing with the youngsters long enough to give him one steady, deliberate look, as if her curiosity had really gotten the better of her. He met that brief, steady gaze without flinching, looking straight into her sweet young face till she resumed her playing. As he passed over the next hill he chanced a look back. The girl was watching him -- was standing at the gate with several little children pulling at her skirts. She presented a picture, standing there in the bright morning sun, that remained in the homesteader's memory. For days he thought of little else -- could see little else -- but a winsome girl with luxuriant, rich chestnut hair and soft cheeks flushed with the bloom of youth and health.

GOOD ROADS RALLY

The Legislative Good Roads Committee has decided to hold a state-wide good roads rally in Portland, Saturday, April 28. Every organization in the state favorable to the road bond bill is invited to send representatives to this gathering. The committee has taken up with the various transportation companies the matter of securing a special reduced rate for those attending the rally. Reports from Astoria and several points in Eastern Oregon are to the effect that the good roads enthusiasts of those sections are planning to charter a boat or special train and come to Portland in large numbers, accompanied by bands. Similar large excursions are in prospect from other points. There is every indication that the rally will prove the most notable "gathering of good roads boosters" that was ever held in the Pacific Northwest.

Friends of good roads who desire to assist in the campaign for the \$6,000,000 bond issue can do so by forwarding subscriptions to Bruce Dennis, Executive Secretary, at Good Roads Headquarters, 310-311 Selling Building, Portland, Oregon. The members of the campaign committee have refused contributions from paving concerns and are relying entirely on free will offerings from good roads enthusiasts to meet the expenses of the vigorous campaign that has been outlined in behalf of the road bond bill.

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If the \$6,000,000 bond issue and the highways designated therein are approved, comprehensive provision for construction of highways will have been provided. Road construction will have been standardized; Federal aid and co-operation secured; the cost of efficient engineering will have been minimized; co-operation between State, Government and counties, together with genuine competitive bidding for construction will have become a reality. The requirement of funds for road construction at a low rate of interest and a method of paying both interest and principal of state bonds out of current revenues already imposed will also have been secured, and this without additional tax burden and with proper safeguards to the general taxpayer.

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The Highway Commission has gone on record on this score. Unless contractors are reasonable in their bids, the Commission has announced that it will install a paving plant and go into the paving business itself.

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Upon the construction of the roads named in the road bond bill, the money formerly spent by the counties in repairing and maintaining the main lines of travel can be used for improving the laterals and less traveled roads.

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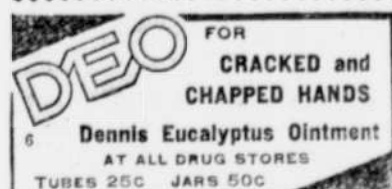
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