

What Well Dressed Oregonians Wore in Covered Wagon Days

BY ROY L. DAVIDSON
Could you attend a public gathering and determine from the kind of clothing folks wore how long they'd been in Washington County? Then listen to this:

They were lean, lank hungry and tough;
We were ruddy, ragged and rough.

That's what one pioneer, a fellow who was a veteran Oregonian because he'd disembarked from his covered wagon a few years previously, wrote, to describe the appearance of the old and newly arrived settlers. Peter H. Burnett, early day Oregon justice, penned the following: "At any public gathering it was easy to distinguish the new from the old settlers. They were dressed in broadcloth, wore linen bosomed shirts and black cravats. We wore patched clothes, for the art of patching was understood to perfection in Oregon."

"But while they dressed better than we did, we fed better than they. Of the two, we were rather the more independent. They wanted our provisions, while we wanted their materials for clothing. They, seeing our ragged condition, concluded that if they parted with their jeans, satins, cottons and calicoes, they would soon be as destitute as we were. Therefore they desired to purchase our provisions on credit and keep their materials for future use."

"This did not suit us precisely. We reasoned this way: That if they wished to place themselves in our ruddy condition, they should incur the risk of passing into our ragged state. They should take the good and bad together. We insisted on an exchange."

There were no means of cloth manufacture in Oregon. The only means of securing textile material was to bring it across the Plains, or barter it from the trading post of the Hudson's Bay company. And the stocks of the latter were not very conducive to the fastidious individual who insisted on a choice. Take what they had on the shelf or leave it. There were plenty of buyers. Chances would be better than even that all, but maybe some shoes, all the wrong size, and the prospective customer would be urged to buy some before they were all gone.

The cloth of the country was buckskin. The Indians had long made excellent use of this soft, pliable leather. When properly handled and tanned, this skin makes a very soft material suitable for clothing and gloves. Indians of Eastern Oregon still continue the art of tanning and making buckskin articles. No so much in the way of clothing, although some beaded capes are turned out. They specialize in gloves which they smoke over a sagebrush fire that leaves them with the pungent odor of sage. Some are left natural color; others are bleached and beaded. These products find ready sale to tourists.

In the beginning buckskin clothing was purchased from the Indians, but enterprising pioneer women early began the process of tanning and making clothes. In this connection might be mentioned the case of Tabitha Brown and her three buckskin needles. She secured her buckskin by trading some of her own clothing to a squaw; the tanned leather she made into gloves which she sold.

The tanning process is quite complicated and usually takes time, but one pioneer wrote that he had put on a suit just 24 hours after the animal had been running in the woods. Indians make use of the hot mineral springs when tanning their deer hides.

Mrs. Elkanah Walker, missionary wife, and mother of the late S. T. Walker, Forest Grove, was adept at making buckskin clothing. A passage from her diary states: "Tuesday, May 9. Cut out leather pants" for Cyrus and started making them." She not only kept her husband's clothes but kept her children supplied as well. The following entries, also from her diary, while not dealing particularly with clothing, are very pointed and convey a vivid picture of early pioneer life: "January 31, 1848—Monday—An ox killed. I helped clean tripe. Mrs. Marquis is still afflicted with toothache. Had Shostenamal (an Indian woman who helped Mrs. Walker) to help wash. Worked about the house all day. Shostenamal washed floors. Think her better than any other."

Wednesday, February 2, salted

beef. Mended a little. Heard a toad sing. Feel anxious about my sewing.

"Saturday, February 5. Have been cleaning tripe, trying tallow, dipping candles, boiling feet, etc., and have had Shostenamal to work two days and have felt so tired and sleepy at night I could not write my journal. Yesterday dipped 17 dozen candles. In the evening we had a preparatory meeting. But I feel that I need more than a meeting to prepare me for the communion or anything else. My mind is so corroded with a deluge of little cares that all I can think is what shall we eat and what shall we drink and where with all shall we be clothed."

It will be noted that the family, like all others of the time, was exceedingly frugal. Not a thing from that ox was wasted. The tripe was saved, the feet boiled up for what nourishment could be salvaged; the tallow went into candles. She doesn't mention the hide, but doubtless it was tanned. What do you suppose she made of the leather?

Mrs. Jesse Applegate, wife of Jesse Applegate of the cutoff by that name, which was a crossing of the Cascades into the Umpqua country of southern Oregon—an attempt to shun the treacherous Columbia Gorge, set a record for industry that might be an all time high. She made cheese and butter which she sold to the men going to the mines. She was the mother of 13 children, and not only made all clothing—shirts, socks, pants, underclothing—but actually spun all the yarn that went into their manufacture. She made all the dresses for herself and daughters, doing the entire job by hand for many years, until, sometime in the '30s she got a sewing machine and a cookstove. These two articles greatly lightened her labors, so the account has it. Then all she had to do was cook on the stove instead of the fireplace, and continue all her clothes making, aided by it, that she also found time to take care of special garden plants besides the butter and cheese—tending the thistles and one things that bob up when there are 13 children to be looked after. What would most of us do with a family of 13? Two or three nearly stump us.

One account of a threshing bee sheds a little light on the clothing situation: "The wheat was threshed on the ground by turning 15 or 20 wild horses on the stacks, changing often, tramping it all to chaff. No raking off finished the whole 16 acres in four days. Some 10 or 12 Indians and boys at each place, double the number necessary—I couldn't prevent them from working. . . . I paid them cloth for a shirt for four days work. Some got ammunition ten or six loads (he means rifle loads) per day."

Separating wheat from the chaff he relates, "men not up to winnowing; here I was assisted by women and girls, done mostly at night, no wind by day—the women using their willow fans, about 20 inches over. During this time I had men sawing and splitting wood, and women carrying it from the river to woodhouse; sawyers have a shirt for four days work, for common work, five days for a shirt. Who did the common work? Was it the women who packed the wheat, or the ones who fanned all that wood from the river? Anyway a shirt was a shirt, those days!"

What did the well dressed Indian, the original Oregonian, wear in order to be correctly clad during covered wagon days? Well, it depended somewhat but in a great many cases about all some of the Indians had on for the day was a little fishing. That would apply pretty well to the Chinooks of the lower Columbia, although one historian says that during the rainy season the men wore hats and moccasins reaching to the hips, made of rushes, for keeping off the rain.

The women did considerable better than that. They were clad in cedar petticoats, made from cedar bark—some from deer skins. Also they had little bonnets made from bark or leaves. The Chinooks were mostly fisherman and did not enjoy the fine leather clothing and fur goods and adornments possessed by their hard horseback riding brethren, the Cayuse and Klickitat tribes to the east.

The clothing worn was determined largely by the conditions of the region in which the different tribes lived. And that left our poor Calapooias of the Tualatin Valley with not a great deal to go on. They were neither fishermen nor did they rate much as hunters. They had no horses and did not ride. Naturally their clothing was about as sparse and as shabby as that of any tribe.



Above illustration shows Ellen Warren, Condon, Oregon, and her 1940 Pacific International Livestock Exposition 4-H Club Grand Champion Hereford Steer.

Title of "First Line of Defense" can well be given those youthful farmers of America—the Boys and Girls of the 4-H Clubs.

The Pacific Northwest holds an enviable record in number of 4-H Clubs and members, having a total of approximately 5000 clubs, with a membership of nearly 40,000 boys and girls, and a very high percentage in number completing their full time of training.

Mr. O. M. Plummer, General Manager of the Pacific International Livestock Exposition, stated recently during an interview, "There is no question of the value of 4-H Club work in aiding in the Defense Program of our country."

To fully appreciate the work of the 4-H Clubs and how they aid our youthful farmers in the production of pure bred livestock, improved methods and greater efficiency on the farm and in the home, one

should visit the Pacific International Livestock Exposition in Portland, October 4th to 11th inclusive, where teams from 4-H Clubs throughout the Northwest compete in demonstrations of various projects by both boys and girls.

Other Exhibits at the Exposition will include Beef and Dairy Cattle, Sheep and Goats, Hogs, Horses, Poultry, Pet Stock, Dogs, Land Products, and Industrial Exhibits. Of special interest will be an Exhibit by the United States War Department.

Entertainment features will include the usual brilliant Horse Show and thrilling Rodeo, Six Horse team driving contest, and many other outstanding events. According to Mr. T. B. Wilcox, Jr., President of the Exposition this year's entertainment program will equal any of the past years' programs, for unusual variety and exceptional quality.

BOGGED DOWN?

The primary class up front waited for the opening songs.

Small Boy—"I didn't want to come today, but mother made me."

Small Girl—"I didn't want to either, but now I'm glad I'm here."

So they trilled in to the Bible School that Sunday morning, with the sunshine outside making a strong bid for the hour in the open. The session begins and came the minutes given over to memory work. The leader called out Romans 3:23—"and the school answered with 'For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.'"

Here the leader called for any present who had never sinned to stand. No one stood. Somewhere along life's road all of them, away down to the tolls, had sinned.

Romans 6:23 was next called for and the room gave back—"For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord." All of them had sinned and the wages of sin is death. By the Book, that room full of young folks, grown-ups and kiddies had earned eternal death; after this world, anguish out in the dark forever.

Next came—"Bow your heads and all who count their sins blotted out by the blood of Christ, thank God for salvation." From all about the room in reverent tones rises—"Thank you God for Salvation." So is the custom in that school. It makes a way for them to speak their faith.

"For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation."—that one has salvation.

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We recall the day when a Portland business man swung about from his desk with—"One thing I know; I have a Savior." We have seen that man grow until today his Christ fills the whole horizon for him. His passion is Christ; his spare time is Bible and Christian service.

Are you bogged down? Is it sin; family break-up; money trouble; sickness? Cry to God for this Christ to come into your life as Savior from all guilt and trust Him as a friend. May His strength, joy, peace, cheer, wisdom, and hope be yours every hour of the live-long day.

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