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SOME EARLY HISTORY OF HEPPNER RECOUNTED BY AN OREGON PIONEER

By T. T. GEER, in Sunday's
Oregonian.

The little city of Heppner, the capital of Morrow County, situated about 50 miles south of the Columbia river is one of the best points to be found anywhere in the interior of Oregon, and is characterized by all features of the frontier, though its men and women are cultured and enjoy all the conveniences of modern life.

For about 30 years Heppner has been the terminus of a branch railroad connecting it with the O.-W. R. & N., and has remained its terminus to the present day, thus reaping the advantage which accrues to all terminal towns. A vast region stretching southward to the Blue Mountains furnishes a substantial basis for a permanent and growing support.

Away back in the later 60s among the prominent merchants of La Grande was J. L. Morrow—known to everybody as "Jack" Morrow. He was in business there for several years, when, in 1871, a man named Henry Heppner, who had been traveling through that country buying hides and wool in a small way, had observed that toward the head of Willow Creek, in the southwestern part of Umatilla County, a few settlers were coming in with stock, and as the range there was practically inexhaustible, the outlook was good for a rapid settlement. He suggested to J. L. Morrow that there was certain to be a town started in that section, and that he had selected the spot where it would be. He further insisted that he and Morrow form a partnership and start a store there in anticipation of some other venture in the same line. Morrow thought enough of the proposition to take a horseback ride across the country with Heppner. They "weighed the probabilities" of a future settlement and decided to put in a stock of goods, which they did in the early Spring of 1872. They selected the spot where Heppner now stands, at the very head of Willow Creek Valley, where the little and ordinarily unpretentious stream bearing that name starts toward the Columbia River, some 50 miles away.

When Morrow and Heppner went to that section with their stock of goods, the only building within miles of the location was a log cabin occupied by a man named Frank Stansbury. He had a few head of cattle and had a squatter's right to the little valley where Heppner now stands. Morrow and Heppner bought a small tract, laid it off into streets and built a small "box" storehouse, a partition separating the store portion from the rear part, which was occupied by Mr. Morrow's family for several years. This building remained on that corner and was used in the same line of business until 1890, when it was removed to make a place for the Palace Hotel, which is one of the best-known and popular hostleries anywhere in Central Oregon.

In 1870 a man named Spencer had started a store about 10 miles from Willow Creek on Rhea Creek, but soon discovered that he had made a mistake in his guess. The head of Willow Creek Valley was a better location for the coming town, but Morrow and Heppner had "beat him to it," so in the Fall of 1872 he moved his stock to Heppner and bought the opposite corner where the First National Bank has been located for more than 20 years.

One of the prominent "first settlers" locating in that section was A. Mallory, a brother of Judge Rufus Mallory, who arrived in Salem with his family from New York State in the fall of 1868. He "wintered" in the Looney neighborhood south of Salem, and in the Spring of 1869 went across the mountains on horseback and decided that the prospect for a splendid stock country was unsurpassed at the head of Willow Creek, and located five miles above where Heppner is. In the Fall he returned to the Willamette Valley and took his family to the new Eastern Oregon home in the Spring of 1870—except one daughter, who, in the meantime, had concluded to become the wife of John B. Looney, since State Senator from Marion County for eight years, and another who had gone to the town of Union to teach school and had favorably listened to the persuasive eloquence of W. T. Wright to become his life partner. These wives and husbands are still living, Mrs. Wright being the mother of Will Wright, ex-State Bank Examiner and now connected with the Scandinavian-American Bank of this city.

Mr. Mallory first Judge in Morrow. Mr. Mallory was appointed the first judge of Morrow County upon its creation by the legislature of 1885, and lived in Heppner until his death a few years ago.

Soon after the location of the Morrow and Heppner store in 1872 the settlement of that portion of Umatilla County progressed rapidly, many people going there from the Willamette Valley with cattle and sheep to take advantage of the immense area of bunchgrass hills and plains that stretched well to the summit of the

Blue Mountains.

Indeed, for a period of about 30 years, or until the building of the branch line from Arlington to Condon a short time ago, there was more wool shipped from Heppner each year direct from the growers, than any other single point anywhere in the West. It is still a great shipping center for wool, but in later years the wheatgrowing industry has been extensively developed and cattle and horses are grown on a large scale.

Nowhere in Eastern Oregon or Washington was there a more magnificent stretch of the famous bunch grass than that which greeted the eye of the traveler as he rode across that portion of Umatilla County now composing the County of Morrow. I first saw Heppner in June, 1877, as I came across that section with my wife and three babies, enroute to Marion County to make my future home, and now recall that for many miles between Pendleton and Heppner there were thousands of acres of bunchgrass, two feet in height, where no animal had taken a bite of the splendid feed since it had emerged from the ground in the early Spring.

Within a mile of the several streams that come down from the mountains at distant intervals the grass had all been eaten off, but otherwise the range at that time was waving in beckoning invitation to the ranger, cowboy and stockman.

Grist Mill Serves Long.

At that early day a grist mill was in process of completion by a man named Beegle, still after 38 years in service, though it has been several times remodeled and improved. There were very few houses in Heppner at that time and the writer recalls purchasing from "Jack" Morrow, whom he had known in La Grande, a small supply of needed articles for the remainder of the trip.

Heppner has had its share of men who became well known over the state for their successes in various lines of endeavor. Among these should be mentioned W. R. Ellis, School Superintendent, Circuit Judge for six years and member of Congress for five terms. John Wilson, who was one of the first men to go from the Willamette Valley to the Heppner country to engage in the sheep business. He served Umatilla County in the Legislature in 1889 and was a member from Marion in 1889, to which county he had later returned.

G. W. Phelps, at present Circuit Judge for that district, was a citizen of Heppner and was a member of the Legislature from Morrow County in 1902. Others of those who were prominent in developing that section of Eastern Oregon were Frank Maddock, one time Sheriff of Umatilla County, a man of the frontier rough-and-ready type; Judge A. Mallory, Judge A. G. Bartholomew, George Conser, connected with the First National Bank for 20 years, and L. N. Brown, twice member of the Legislature. The Ayers, Rhea and Maddock families were prominent in the early days in furthering the growth of Heppner and Morrow County, several of whom still remain there.

After continuing in the mercantile business for a few years, Henry Heppner disposed of his interests and returned to his first vocation, that of buying hides. Old-timers in Heppner recall many of the characteristics of this pioneer deliver after wealth. For several years he rode a mare he owned all over the country in quest of hides, and, having no wagon, or perhaps needing none, he would often lash several hundred sheep hides together, with a few cowhides for an outside covering, and drag the "cargo" from the hills miles away into Heppner by a lariat fastened to the horn of his saddle.

There are several one-story brick dwellings still standing in Heppner which were erected by this pioneer merchant and tradesman, bearing his name and one presenting the date of 1889.

"Jack" Morrow remained in business in Heppner for a period of nearly 20 years, was a member of the Legislature in 1876 and died a few years ago, leaving a splendid reputation for business integrity and with as many friends as he had acquaintances. His son, J. W. Morrow, owner and landlord of the Palace Hotel for a few years and afterward clerk of Morrow County for eight years, is now the tax agent for the O.-W. R. & N. Company in Portland. He also served his district as State Senator for four years.

The public will generally recall the fearful catastrophe which overtook Heppner on Sunday, June 14, 1903, when a cloudburst in the immense tablelands between the city and the Blue Mountains brought down the different canyons and gulches which converge at that point a veritable wall of water, which the surviving residents say was 30 feet in height as it entered the upper edge of the town. Its flow was retarded and aggravated by the remains of houses and barns, which it had gathered from the farms above, thus adding to the irresistible volume that swept everything before it as it dealt out death and destruction in its furious rush through the surprised and helpless city.

Within 20 minutes it was all over,

and 214 people were drawn into the pitiless flood and drowned. Considering its population, it was the largest per cent of loss of life ever experienced by any city in the United States in the same length of time. A few days ago I visited the cemetery, which overlooks the city, and was again impressed with the awful extent of the calamity as I walked among the gravestones, reading the statement over and over again: "Died on June 14, 1903."

At one place eight—I believe it was eight—stones are in a row, each announcing that Henry, aged 6, or Myrtle, aged 3, as the case might be, and the mother had passed away on June 14, 1903. Seven children and the mother at 3 o'clock in the afternoon were in their home, happy and unsuspecting, and within 20 minutes were all dead. Hardly a family in the city escaped a loss of some member.

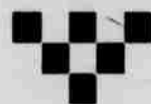
With characteristic grit, however, and with the belief that such an experience would perhaps never overtake the city again, Heppner began its rebuilding and it is now one of the most thriving little cities to be found anywhere in the Inland Empire.

The Morrow County Fair has just closed with a splendid exhibit of fruit, vegetables and grains and an attendance that indicated the loyalty of its people and their faith in its steady growth. What it needs most, indeed, what all Oregon needs most, is more people on smaller farms—a condition that will insure better cultivation, larger yields and increased profits with less labor.

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