

War Whoops in Morrow County



The Battle of Sand Hollow or Wells Springs, was a result of the Nov. 29, 1847 Whitman Massacre at the mission near Walla Walla in which Dr. and Mrs. Whitman and 12 others were killed. A good sized group of children and adults who lived at the mission were held captive by the Indians. The Chief Factor, Mr. Ogden, paid a ransom for the captives and returned them to Oregon City. The Cayuses were the criminals—the Nez Perce, Spokanes and the Umatillas had not joined them. The Oregon Provisional Government set up a volunteer force to do battle.

Cornelius Gilliam was chosen colonel of the regiment which set forth from a rendezvous at The Dalles on Feb. 27, 1848. Several battles

occurred on the way east, the most severe being at Sand Hollow, in the Wells Springs area of Morrow County where depressions in the sand made convenient natural rifle pits. Details of this battle are related carefully.

The provisional troops came upon the Cayuse band which attacked them from the hollows. The first onset of the Indians hit Captain Thomas McKay's company which was on the extreme right, or south side of the eastward bound force. The Indians were fighting not so much for the protection of the Whitman murderers as for the defense of their country from a general white invasion. They feared, and with reason, that if they permitted a regiment of white soldiers to invade their territory severe reprisals would be made, and the innocent would suffer with the guilty. Their principal leaders were Five Crows, a general chief and a recent Protestant convert, and War Eagle, also a Cayuse.

THE "INVINCIBLE" CHIEFS

The story is that these chiefs had assured their followers that the white soldiers should never reach the Umatilla River. Five Crows asserted that no ball from a white man's gun could kill

him, for he was a wizard. War Eagle claimed that he was not only invulnerable to bullets, but that he could catch between his teeth and swallow all the balls from all the guns of the white army if they were fired at him.

As the troops moved eastward, the two chiefs rushed from under cover, galloped up to the white line of battle to prove their powers and ability as wizards—and one of them shot a small dog belonging to one of the soldiers which had run out to bark at them. The troops had been ordered not to fire first on the Indians, as the desire of Colonel Gilliam was to avoid hostilities if possible, but when Tom McKay saw the Chiefs charging fiercely toward the lines and saw the flash of their guns, he was not to be restrained any longer, so, taking careful aim at War Eagle, the nearest, he shot him, killing him instantly. First Lt. Charles McKay, the Captain's brother followed his example, and, firing hastily, wounded Five Crows so seriously that he was compelled to give up his command to another chief.

SOLDIERS CARRY

OUT MISSION

This unexpected disaster disillusioned the Indians who

had believed their chiefs invulnerable, and though under the new leader they contested the advancing troops stubbornly until night fell, the battle ended then. Once during the afternoon Captain H.J.G. Maxon's company on the left side of the force advanced beyond supporting distance and were surrounded by the Indians. Eight of his men were wounded before they were rescued. In all, eleven soldiers were wounded in the battle, but none killed. The Indian loss was severe, but as usual, they carried off most of their dead and wounded. The Oregon force continued east and north and reached the Whitman Mission the third day after this battle.

AN ACCIDENTAL DEATH

Are you wondering when and why Colonel Gilliam happened to be buried at Wells Springs? After the troops completed their work at Walla Walla and were returning to Oregon City to report to Governor Abernathy, they again camped at Wells Springs. On March 20, 1848 Colonel Gilliam was dragging a lead rope from a wagon when he was instantly killed because a soldier had laid a cocked rifle in the wagon and the rope caught on the trigger.

In 1926 a thousand persons went to Wells Springs to dedicate a plaque to Colonel Gilliam. Leslie Scott was the principal speaker. Wells Springs was the main claim to fame of Morrow County in the days of the Oregon Trail, but has been rather neglected

since the plaque dedication in 1926.

BANNOCK—PIUTE

WAR SCARE

In 1878 the Bannock Indians of Idaho and the Piutes of central Oregon seemed "itching for a fight". The experiences of the Sioux in 1876, and the long and nearly successful campaign of Chief Joseph in the Nez Perce War of 1877 left most Indians in an attitude of unrest and desirous for war.

Many reports circulated throughout Eastern Oregon of bands of Indians that were burning and destroying at will as they moved through the mountain areas and encountered sheepherders and isolated stockmen. A first hand account of the big scare in Morrow county is given in an old hand-written diary which has been copied by Mrs. Rachel Harnett of the County Museum. This daily account started on Jan. 1, 1875 and the last copy is dated Oct. 1878.

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