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When White Men First Beheld the "Sea of Silence" Pioneer Tells Own Story of Discovery of Crater Lake



"Not until my mule stopped within a few feet of the rim of Crater lake did I look down, and if I had been riding a blind mule, I firmly believe I would have ridden over the edge to death."

Thus it was that on June 12, 1853, 69 years ago, the first white man who ever beheld Crater lake literally stumbled upon that magnificent body of water. As he rode his mule up the long slope that was to lead to the lake rim, with his eyes searching the rocks for some outcropping of gold thought to be hidden in this region, little did he realize that he was soon to be the discoverer of the bluest, deepest and most beautiful mountain lake in the world. This hardy prospector was J. W. Hillman, an Oregon pioneer of 1849. The trail over which Hillman and his party toiled in those early days is now replaced by an automobile highway, while the lake itself and surrounding region have been fittingly set aside as a national park, where many thousands come each summer to be enthralled by the same wild beauty which held Hillman and his party under its spell over threescore years ago.

A few years ago Mr. Hillman died at a ripe old age at his home in Louisiana, where he spent the closing years of his life. Shortly before his death he dictated his memoirs to Bentley B. Mackay of the Louisiana State University. These memoirs have only recently been cast into shape for publication by Mr. Mackay, and that portion dealing with the discovery of Oregon's wonder lake is herewith published for the first time. The story not only tells of the discovery of Crater lake, but also describes briefly the trip of the emigrant train to which Hillman was attached across the plains to the Columbia, and gives a graphic picture of the Oregon country of those pioneer days.

By Bentley W. Mackay.

With thousands of tourists thronging beautiful Crater Lake national park every season and gazing upon the limpid blue water of the most beautiful lake in America, it is indeed fitting that some thought be given to that intrepid explorer, J. W. Hillman, and his little band of 22 men who first viewed the lake in all of its wild beauty on June 12, 1853. Outliving all of his companions, Mr. Hillman died only a few years ago in Louisiana at the age of 83, death being indirectly due to an Indian bullet that he carried in his body for nearly 60 years.

Discoverer Tells Own Story

"I was born in Albany, N. Y., March 25, 1832. In 1848 my father moved with his family to New Orleans by ship. We remained in New Orleans until the California gold fever broke out in 1849, and my father decided to go to California, taking me with him.

"At the time there was a regiment of mounted rifles at St. Joseph, Mo., preparing to make the long journey to Oregon. The teamster master's department was being recruited in New Orleans, and we were lucky enough to be allowed to join.

"Our trip up the lonely Mississippi river was typical of the pioneer life of that day. On our boat there was a varied assortment of men, from the dregs of society to millionaires. Gambling and drinking were indulged in night and day, and each day brought its share of excitement. It was rumored that Jack Wilson, a notorious gambler, won and lost two fortunes before he was killed in a wild battle which occurred on the boat 50 miles from St. Louis.

Trip Across Plains Begun

"We landed in St. Louis and remained there for several days. We caught a boat going up the Missouri river to St. Joseph, where our regiment was stationed, preparatory to making the trip to the unknown Oregon country.

"As soon as the thousands of emigrants heard that a regiment of soldiers was soon going to 'hop off' into the unknown country, they made ready to follow close on our trail.

"The officers finally decided that due to better camping facilities the outfit should be broken up into small companies. There were 300 six-mule wagons and these were divided into groups of 100 wagons each. I was sent along as extra driver.

Oregon Trail Followed

"We followed what was known as

the Oregon trail, intending to cross the Rockies at South Pass. The country was unsurpassed in its wild beauty, the miles and miles of uncharted prairies stretched as far as the eye could see and the grass waving and nodding before the wind. Above us by day shone the blazing sun, and when it disappeared into the very ground, as it were, it seemed but a moment until darkness, when in all directions could be seen the camp fires of the soldiers and emigrants. The two things that impressed me most were the awful ravages of cholera and the thousands of buffalo that could be seen in the distance. We had the pleasure of witnessing several stampedes of these animals. The leader of the herd would become frightened and begin to run; soon it would seem that the entire universe was moving. As far as the eye could see were the brownish forms of the great beasts gathering momentum as they swept along. On they would

rush, sweeping all before them, over a wagon train, through a river of over a precipice, but never would their mad rush be checked until they were overcome by exhaustion. In the wake hundreds of the weaker members strewed the way, some crushed and mangled, others bleeding and dying; all inevitably falling prey to the coyotes and wolves that followed them.

Indians Not Feared

"We came in contact with a great number of Indians, but our immediate party was too strong, and we feared no attack. Troops were called out several times to go to the assistance of small trains that had been raided by the savages, and each time a number of the emigrants had been killed.

"When we reached the Rocky mountains and saw the water flowing toward the Pacific we thought that our troubles were nearly ended, but such was not the case. Desertions among

the soldiers became very common when we came to the trails that led to Salt Lake or to California.

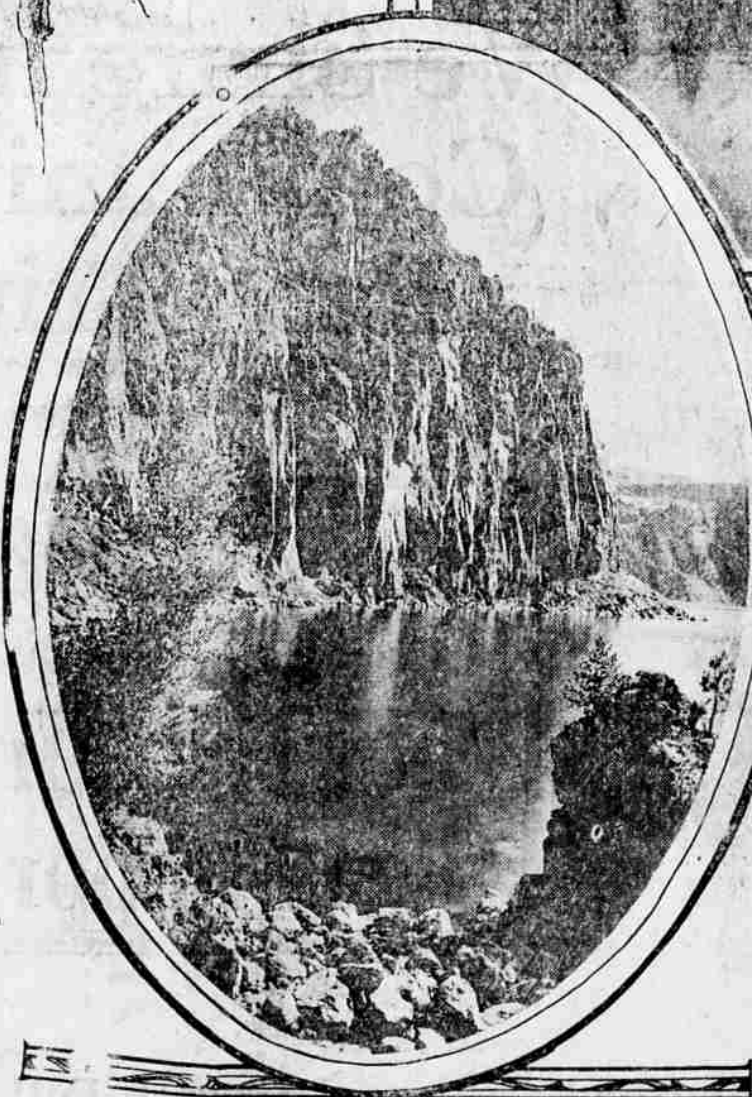
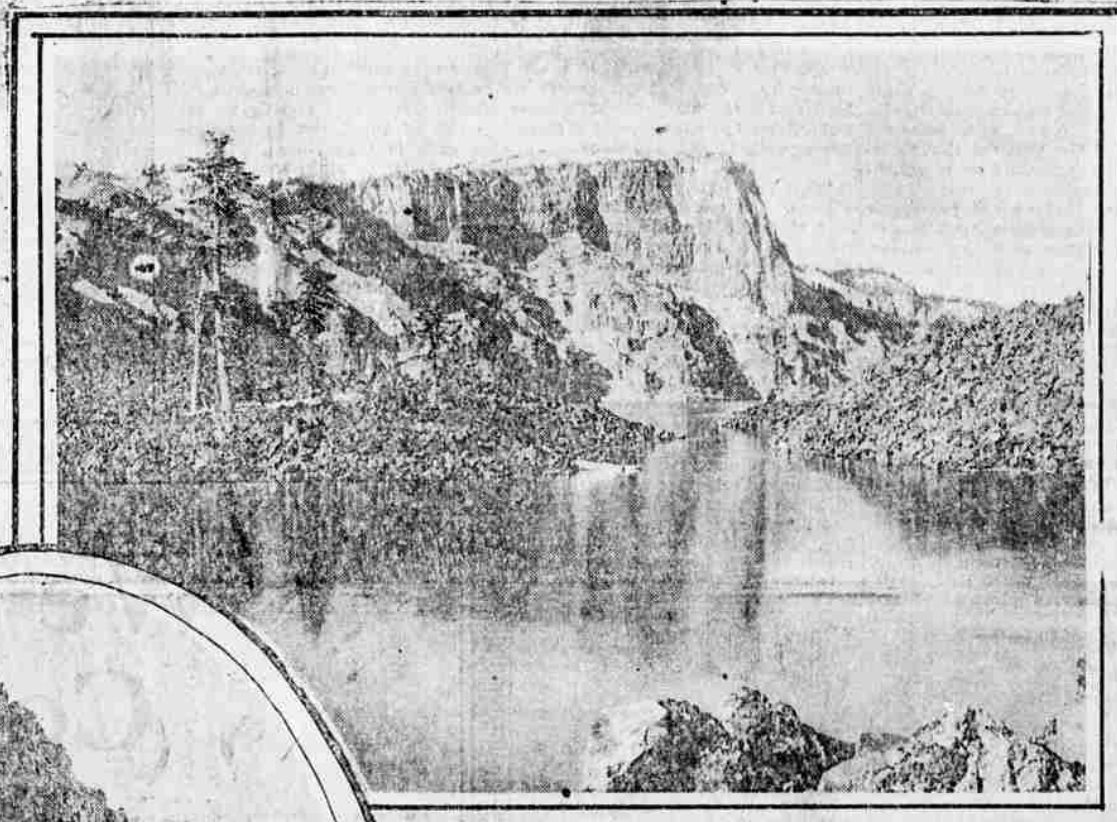
"Finally we came to the mighty Columbia river and its majestic sweep was a revelation to us all. The caravan now headed straight for Oregon City, reaching there September 18, 1849, after having been five months and three days on the journey.

Oregon City Tiny Village

"Oregon City was a tiny place, having much the appearance of a New England village, rows of small houses lining the streets with neat, clean gardens in front.

"Turning over our wagons to the quartermaster ended our connections with the United States government, and a new and different life was begun.

"My father heard that there was



View of The Palisades



Looking Across Lake From South

lying at the mouth of the Willamette river a three masted full-rigged whaler, the Aurora, commanded by Captain Kilbourne, ready to make a trip to San Francisco with a load of lumber, and we were able to get passage.

"I remember but one settlement between Oregon City and Baker's bay, at the mouth of the Columbia, and that was Astoria.

"Portland Mass of Timber
"When we came to what was known as the village of Portland we stopped for a few hours for wood. I went ashore and looked for the town, but could not see it at first because of the tangle of fallen timber.

I climbed a tree and in the distance I saw three huts, a blacksmith shop and on small commissary. This was in the latter part of September, 1849. When I returned to this town in 1852 I found that a great many changes had taken place.

"We were held up in Baker's bay for several weeks, due to the fact that we could not cross the bar into the open water. Several times we were nearly dashed to pieces on the Peacock shoals.

"One day everything was favorable and we dashed across the bar and were soon on the high seas. The trip to San Francisco was made without incident. We reached there

a few days before the big fire that swept the tented city off the map.

"My adventures in the gold mining country, of course, is another story, but I will say that while we were lucky enough to find some gold, we did not discover enough to make us very wealthy. I soon went to northern California, and from there I went to Jacksonville, Ore. It was a live mining town of about 1200 inhabitants. The town was situated at the mouth of a gulch at the edge of the beautiful Rogue river valley, and the mining was not done in the immediate vicinity of the town. I learned

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