

KLAMATH FALLS, OREGON, SUNDAY, JUNE 9, 1963

Pioneer Pens Descriptive New Years Letter

Orson Stearns Letter Reveals Life In Klamath Basin In Early Days

New Year's Day, 1870, and a young pioneer, lonely settler in a new area, pens a letter to a friend.

That letter today represents an excellent picture of the first settlers of this Basin, and the conditions under which they lived.

As Orson Stearns, 27 years old, sat down to pen this letter, he could look back on almost three years during which he had battled the wilderness and established his home.

When the Civil War ended, regulars were moved back to handle the duties at Fort Klamath, and Stearns had been sent to the

with the Indians, and four years before this an agency had been established for these Indians on the other side of the big lake.

Already, the outlines of a settlement were beginning to appear on the banks of Link River. George Nurse and Edgar Overton had started a small trading venture there and it had begun to grow.

Wendolen Nus, long considered the first pioneer to settle in the Basin, had operated a ferry two miles down the river from George Nurse's enterprise for several years after Stearns had arrived, but later had given it up when

and that he had better start preparing it.

As Stearns prophesied in this letter, it was only two years, 1872, before the government granted a mail route into the area. A man named Kilgore of Ashland made weekly trips into the area and handled the mail task for three years.

Unquestionably, the cabin of Orson Stearns would have been one of his first steps in the Basin because it would have been located on his line of march.

This letter represents some of the earliest actual correspondence from this area, exclusive of that

Republican ticket to the State Legislature from what was then Lake County.

He died in Ashland, July 29, 1926, at the age of 83, closing a long and colorful career.

Briar Springs
Jan. 1, 1870

Kind Friend,

In looking over my old letters today I came across yours of last April which I had laid away marked "answered." Now as I had thought all the time that it was never answered there is good reason to believe that it was so marked through mistake. I will try to answer some of the questions asked in your letter, but which you have doubtless forgotten were this.

Since I wrote you last, great

enough to hang my coffee mill, stands my cupboard. It is six feet in height, the exact distance from the floor to the joist above, and is about one foot in depth, has boards for the side next the fireplace, and (second relief page one) the wall makes the other side. It has seven shelves made of split pine boards resting on cleets of the same material, nailed to the sides. It contains a large amount of a variety of styles, also several wooden boxes (empty tea chests) and tin boxes, bottles of tin cans, tin kettles, pans of milk &c. The lower shelf contains several black kettles and two tin reflectors for baking.

An empty sugar barrel (that is emptied of its sugar) standing against the East wall and against the cupboard contains a part of a fifty pound sack of flour; the head of the barrel unlike the majority of barrel heads is on top of the barrel and has a piece of wood nailed across the top of it, projecting about an inch on either side with a scallop cut underneath it in the center to admit of being held of. This latter piece of architecture of my own invention and took about ten minutes to complete it. To the right of the barrel is a shelf about two feet from the floor, made of a piece of board supported by two pins underneath driven into holes bored in the house logs. Upon this shelf are two buckets with water. (I believe in water as a cleanser and purifier as well as being quite good about cooking.) An old fashioned pewter cup hangs just above on a nail. About one third of the distance from the cupboard to the opposite wall, about three and one half feet from the floor is a hole cut through the walls two and one half feet long by fourteen inches high with an empty flour sack nailed over the outside; this is my East window.

The log forming the window casing is a very nice place to keep my lamp, two empty cigar boxes (I don't use cigars, though I find the boxes convenient) containing thread, beeswax, thimbles, shot, caps, matches, etc., etc. Still nearer the southern wall and just under the joice is an empty boot box nailed with the bottom against the wall, in this box (open at the front) are several books, among them Greeley's Conflict, "Grant & Sherman, Their Generals & Campaigns," "General Laws of Oregon," "Wells Leawyn," "Davis Algebra," "Parker's Philosophy," "Inquire Within," "Guide to Public Business," "Hooker's Illustrated N. Hist.," and the "Arabian Nights," the last I have never read but kept it on hand as a last resort when other reading matter fails.

On top of the cupboard between the joice, are about a dozen number of "Harper's Magazine," and one copy of the Overland Monthly Justice Docket Ledger, several papers and my portfolio.

Underneath this bookcase is my bed, a very rude frame work on four legs, with wooden bedboards, hay mats, several army blankets, two or three ancient quilts in their dotage and two flour sacks full of wild goose and wild duck feathers.

Underneath the bed, a boxful of canned fruits, one to hold dirty clothes (most of my wardrobe), one containing my carpenter tools (what few I have), another of nails, a can of coal oil, a basin to feed my cat out of and a pair of overalls.

Over my bed, on the south wall of my den and well up towards my chamber floor, is another shelf, similar to my water bucket shelf, only larger, containing clean, woolen, my best (only) hat, a mosquito bar (not used this time of year) and several newspapers that I have read.

From my wardrobe, along the wall towards the southwest corner of the shanty on numerous nails driven, pendant upon them several articles of wear that never get washed, my great coat, best trousers, &c.

Resting on the floor between the foot of the bed and the west wall, is my wooden trunk containing my ammunition in reserve, many old letters, new clothes (not many of the last) and other odds and ends that somehow or other will accumulate around a bachelor ranch, a sugar barrel half full of sugar, molasses keg with a gallon or two of golden syrup in it, a nail keg with a lot of nails in it and a pair of moccasins on top of it; a box containing two partly filled sacks of salt, coarse and fine, a sack with a few beans in it, several small sacks of garden seeds, two sacks of barley, one of them nearly empty, the last named my hay feed, (seed), Mid-

The letter written by O. A. Stearns, and reproduced here, was taken from the historical files of Ruth King. It came from the late Hale Scarborough, once sports and city editor of the Herald and News. There was no reference as to whom the letter was addressed.

Stearns used the name Link River for the location of his homestead which is used on old maps, showing course of the stream from Lake Ewauna to Keno where it emptied into the Klamath River. Today Link River is referred to as the mile-long stream connecting Upper Klamath Lake and Lake Ewauna.

changes have taken place in my father's family. My oldest brother Oscar was married a year ago last Oct. to a Miss Sarah McManus.

Last February I lost one of the best of mothers. She died of smallpox, and was followed in eight days by my youngest brother, George. My sister Arminda was married last June to a man by the name of Purvis, a tanner by trade. They live about ten miles from my father's where Mr. Purvis has charge of a tannery. I think he is an excellent man.

My younger brother, Newel, is on my father's place, and there is talk of his being married soon. As for myself, I am about sixty five miles East of my father's on the margin of the great Klamath basin country and across (across) the Cascade range of mountains, East Rogue River. I have been here nearly two years and a half; ever since I was mustered out of the U. S. service. My place was the second one taken up in this country and when I came here the Indians were still occupying the country though it had already been ceded to the U. S. by treaty stipulations. The Indians were subsequently removed to the reservation about thirty five miles from here on Sprague River, Williamson River, Upper Klamath Lake and Klamath Marsh. During the past year there have been collected there several hundred Snakes (Indians) and during the past week the tribe of Modocs numbering nearly three hundred, were removed there from Little Klamath and Modoc lakes, South, and South East of here.

Soon after taking up my ranch, a took in a partner, a young man by the name of Jewellyn Culver, a former companion in arms. He stayed with me a year when growing tired of pioneering and its loneliness, he sold out to his father who comes out here two or three times each year but does not stay long, or do much in the way of improving his part of the place when here. Some of the time I have been a lone, some of the time I have had help for company. My castle I built of hewn logs eight by ten inches in thickness and fourteen by sixteen feet in length. It fronts towards the setting sun and has a porch on the side with a ground floor. The apartments are divided into two, one below stairs and the other above.

The lower apartment has a fireplace in the North end built of volcanic rock and mother earth, large enough to admit a stick three feet in length. It is about 16 inches in depth, has stone and bricks projecting from the jam on each side and a large stone hearth in front. My floor is of sawn lumber which was rafted from the fort down the lake, thirty miles and hauled eight miles, the distance from the lake here. The boards are neither planed nor jointed but are put down rough, leaving a few small cracks, not quite large enough to admit a person's foot between the boards, but quite large enough to admit plenty of fresh air. To the right of my fireplace, and occupying all the space between it and the wall on that side, except a space large

enough to hang my coffee mill, stands my cupboard. It is six feet in height, the exact distance from the floor to the joist above, and is about one foot in depth, has boards for the side next the fireplace, and (second relief page one) the wall makes the other side. It has seven shelves made of split pine boards resting on cleets of the same material, nailed to the sides. It contains a large amount of a variety of styles, also several wooden boxes (empty tea chests) and tin boxes, bottles of tin cans, tin kettles, pans of milk &c. The lower shelf contains several black kettles and two tin reflectors for baking.

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My door is of open work, made of boards with pieces nailed crosswise, and has cracks between the boards large enough to let the wind through quite freely; it is hung with east iron bolts, has a wooden catch with a string tied to it and passing through a small hole above the latch to the outside and a small piece of wood tied to the end of the string to keep it outside the door and handy to pull on. A staple driven through the door casing near the outer edge, with a short chain with a link at the end fitting the staple in the door when shut, can be secured with a padlock and it keep out the curious crowd.

Between the door and the North West corner of the house, and very near the door is another window similar to the first, except that it reaches down nearer the floor, is nearly three times as large, and has rough board casing. A narrow place between the casing of the door and the window casing has a few little shelves where are what stones, gloves, bottles of oil, and other indispensable. Underneath the window is a wash stand almost the exact counterpart of the water shelf; an empty sardine box (empty as regards its former occupants) contains the soap. To the right of the window hangs a small looking glass, two towels and a comb. The corner to the left of the fireplace is devoted to holding my wood.

The wide of the wall above my woodpile is ornamented with a powder horn, a saw and a shaving knife.

My chamber floor is composed of split pineboards, four feet ten inches in length, just the distance between the center of the center joice, it extends from the South End of the house, two thirds of the way to the North End where it abruptly terminates leaving the chamber the very handy repository of all kinds of traps, ropes, pack saddles, flour, cans of lard, old boots, a few tools, my wooden wash board, and the place where I put my broom when in a state of repose.

There are two or three places for guns, made by driving pins into the joice near the North Side of the house, and one of those places is occupied by a large double barreled shotgun. In the cracks of the wall are sticking many little things not worthy of mention, and hanging on nails are other articles including two housewives, (so they are called) these are not the kind of housewives I should prefer, but are very handy about the house. The outside walls are ornaments with pegs in places containing saddle, hame, (hames) and other implements of ranching.

South of the house about twelve or fifteen steps is a spring of

pure water, not ice cold nor milk warm, but just about halfway between the two in temperature. To the East and the South is a field of about 20 acres, containing, besides the twelve acres of land plowed, and the eight acres unplowed, a log stable, with a small loft containing oats in the sheaf, a wagon shed on the East Side of it and a small hay stack just near enough to be easily transferred to the stable loft when required. A root house built of double walls of logs and an intervening space of two feet between the walls filled with dirt, roofed over with boards first, straw next and dirt afterwards; the floor of earth about two feet lower than the ground

one fourth of a mile to two miles wide I it is divided into several small valleys by spurs of the hills running nearly to the river or marsh for in some places the river runs out into the basin leaving a marsh on either side, but it generally bounds the West Side of the marsh.

My ranch is located near the center of one of the largest small valleys where the spurs of the hills (P. S. Direct to Ashland Mills, Ore. O. A. Stearns, Fourth Relief) continue in the form of a slightly elevated succession of knolls on a continuous lumpy ridge to the river. These knolls are elevated from the ground on either side and from them burst small

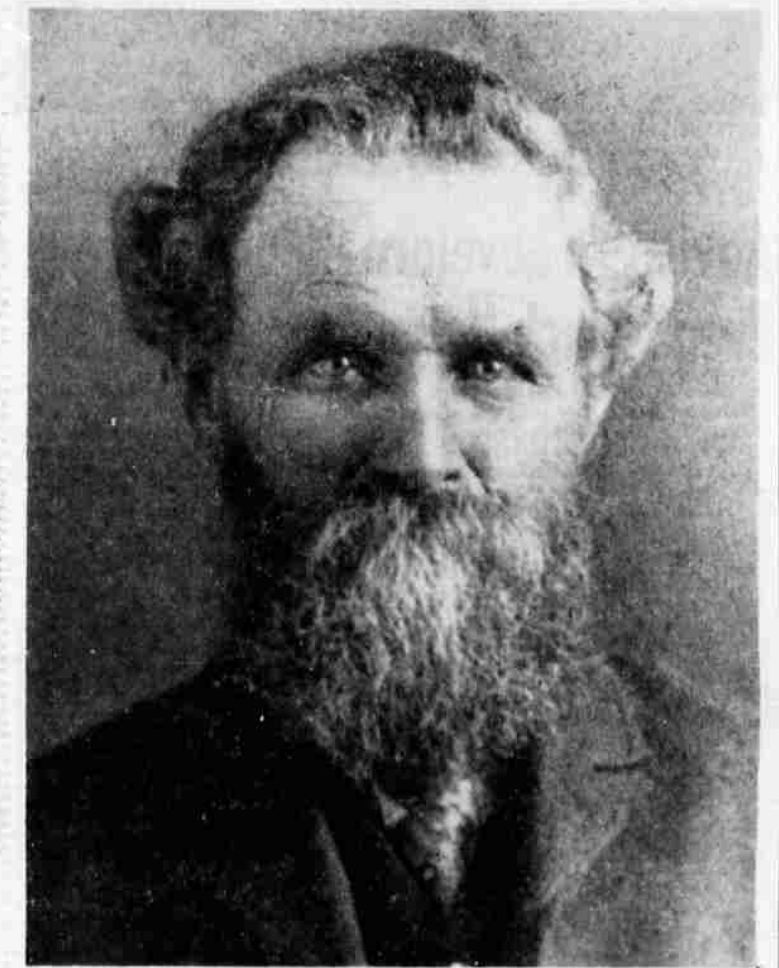
A fine variety of wild clover grows abundant near where there are springs and a native blue joint is also quite plentiful. There are no meadows of tame grass yet and everybody depends upon the natural grass for grazing and feeding all their stock. Some idea of the grazing qualities of this valley can be gained by taking into consideration the fact that there are nearly eight hundred head of cattle and one hundred horses owned and kept by persons residing here,

besides the thousands of cattle, sheep and horses grazed by droves in passing through here. With all this amount of stock here, and the grazing in droves in passing through, the grass upon the hills seems nearly as abundant as ever, and we do not think of feeding unless the snow falls a foot deep over the ground.

This valley is but one among many in this great basin, and though the first to commence settling up is by no means the only one that is becoming peopled with industrious pioneers. I suppose if I want to say that there are already more than three hundred people in this country when I was the second one, I would not exaggerate.

We expect to get a postal route

(Continued on Page 2)



THE GRASS WAS LUSH — The untrammelled land that lay east of the mountains between Ashland, the Rogue River Valley and the hunting grounds of the Klamath and the Modocs in Southern Oregon, was a challenge to the young Orson Stearns. The morning sun was gold on the nearby lower hills and water flowed through the meadows. The fertile earth waited and with vision, an Illinois-born youth left the Prairie State and came to Oregon in 1853. His birthplace on Jan. 9, 1843, was near Rockford, Ill., in Winnebago County. He left behind, his parents, David Ebenezer and Fidelia S. Cannon Stearns. On Nov. 7, 1864, he enlisted in Company I — First Regiment of Oregon Volunteers and served as a sergeant at Fort Klamath during the closing months of the Civil War. This photo, taken in his later years, was provided by Hal Ogle of Klamath Falls, Klamath County historian. Stearns helped organize and was the first president of the Pioneer Association in Klamath County. The Orson Stearns Elementary School in Klamath Falls is named in his memory.

Stearns Mountains and then to Jacksonville where he was mustered out of service after almost four years.

But during that stint, he had come to love the Klamath country and had filed his claim while still in service. Upon discharge on July 19, 1867, he retraced his steps to this 417-acre area which he had long coveted, and joined by a former comrade-in-arms, Jewellyn Culver, he had begun to fashion his own life, in this new land.

On this day, the first of the new year, of 1870, he comments that several hundred people were now in the Basin. Six years before a treaty had been worked out

Nurse started his own ferry at a narrower spot along the Link River.

In the year that had just ended for Stearns, 1869, a new road had been laid out over to the valley.

While he could not actually see their homes, Stearns knew that a friend, O. T. Brown, was now settled over on Spencer Creek, and not far away Dennis Crawley and his partner, H. H. Thatcher, had taken up land.

It may have been any of these people that Stearns was expecting for dinner on this New Year's Day as he notes in his letter, in closing, what his menu will be

from Fort Klamath, and should provide interesting reading.

The housewife Stearns mentions in his letter, joined him after their marriage in San Francisco on May 17, 1873. She was Margaret Jane Riggs, born in Ray County, Missouri.

She died on the home ranch on their 22nd wedding anniversary. On Jan. 10, 1899, he married Luella M. Sherman, a native of Ohio.

Stearns played a big part in political history of the area. He served as the first justice of the peace with jurisdiction over Lake County, then part of Klamath, and in 1890 was elected on the



A LANDMARK — In 1936 this was the oldest house standing in Klamath County, built by O. A. Stearns in 1870 on land on the Keno Road which he bought from the state of Oregon. The frame house originally had four rooms with a porch across the front and was considered a fine home in pioneer days. The shingles on the house were made by hand by Oscar Stearns, a brother of O. A. Many prominent people were guests in this home and the owners always "kept travel." The original homestead joined this land. Members of the family still live nearby.



ACROSS THE MARSH — BELOW THE HILLS — A grandson of Orson Stearns, Julian Ager of Klamath Falls, points across seeded land and pasture now owned by Vern Howard, president of the Klamath Stockman's Commission Company, to the spot in center of black circle, where Orson Stearns located his first home after completing military duty at Fort Klamath. He was then 24 years old. The future farmer, stock raiser and dairyman located his cabin about eight miles southwest of present Klamath Falls, near Link River. He planted his garden in the midst of numerous springs and named his home Briar Springs. The location is to the left of Highway 66 or the Ashland Highway, (traveling west), beyond the Weyerhaeuser plant. Ager, following his illustrious grandfather, is a surveyor, instructing students at Oregon Technical Institute. Orson Stearns served at one time with a government surveying party.