

# Wallowa History Center *Preserving Our Past for the Future*

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*The Wallowa History Center works to save the memories, stories,  
and photographs that define the history and culture of the places we call home.*

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Wallowa Sun  
October 23, 1925

## NOT TO LIVE TO LEARN BUT TO LEARN TO LIVE, PHILOSOPHY OF PIONEER

By Carl Gregory

The sole and distinctive purpose of a biography is not to tell of a man's modest estimate of himself and his accomplishments, but should be a perpetual record establishing his character by the consensus on the part of his fellowmen. Throughout Wallowa County, Ernest F Johnson is spoken of in terms of admiration and respect. His life has been so varied in activity, so far-reaching in its effects, so honorable in its purpose that it has become an integral part of the history of Wallowa County.



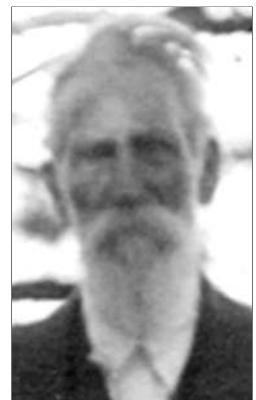
Ernest F. Johnson

During the formative period in the history of Oregon and several years prior to the creation of Wallowa County, E. F. Johnson took up his residence within the borders of Wallowa County, and for fifty years he has made his home in this county, watching its growth and development from a wilderness into a splendid commonwealth which occupies a foremost position in the galaxy of counties which form our state. Mr. Johnson said: "With the exception of three years, I have lived in Wallowa County all my life, and I am now fifty-three years of age."

### 4700 Acre Farm Owned

Sitting on the front porch of his modern farm home, which is located three miles northwest of Wallowa on his forty-seven-hundred acre farm, Mr. Johnson related, with all of youthful vigor, his fifty-three years' experience with life, and said, "I feel almost as young as I ever did."

Mr. Johnson is a native of the state, his birth having occurred in Douglas County on the 24<sup>th</sup> of September, 1872 as a son of Joseph F. and Fanny (Applegate) Johnson. The father was born in Missouri in 1839, but in 1847 he crossed the plains with an ox team to Oregon. Here he met and subsequently married Miss Applegate, who was born and reared in Douglas County, and they made this their home state until just recently when each of them died in Lower Valley.



Joseph F. Johnson

Joseph F Johnson very conscientiously obeyed the command, “Young man, go West!” Go West he did, and only a few years after the famous Applegate train arrived, which was led by Jesse Applegate and to whom Fanny was directly related. Thus, it is seen that Ernest Johnson’s grandfather was Jesse Applegate, the leader of the covered wagon of 1843.

**Scion of Pioneer Leader**

In speaking of our first government and the emigration of 1843, led by Applegate, Joseph Schafer in his *History of the Pacific Northwest* says: “The work of the pioneers at Champoeg was of considerable importance in the history of Oregon and the Pacific Coast; for it called the attention of men everywhere to the American in this region; it quickened the interest of the United States government; and announced to Great Britain that her subjects were no more completely dominant in the Pacific Northwest. Yet, while the Americans then in the country deserve credit for taking the first steps, these steps were largely due to the appearance of the great emigration in the fall. It changed the small American majority into an overwhelming one; provided able political leaders like Burnett, Applegate, McCarver, Nesmith, Waldo and Lovejoy; increased the property of the country; and gave a feeling of security and stability which only numbers can impart.”

From such facts, a realization begins to form that history is made every day, and that many facts stated in books can be certified by people now living. Who is it that would prefer to read Civil War history when the same could be told by the veteran? Such is the case with the history of our state. Comparatively speaking, our state and county still flourish in the pioneer age.

**Educational Advantages Limited**

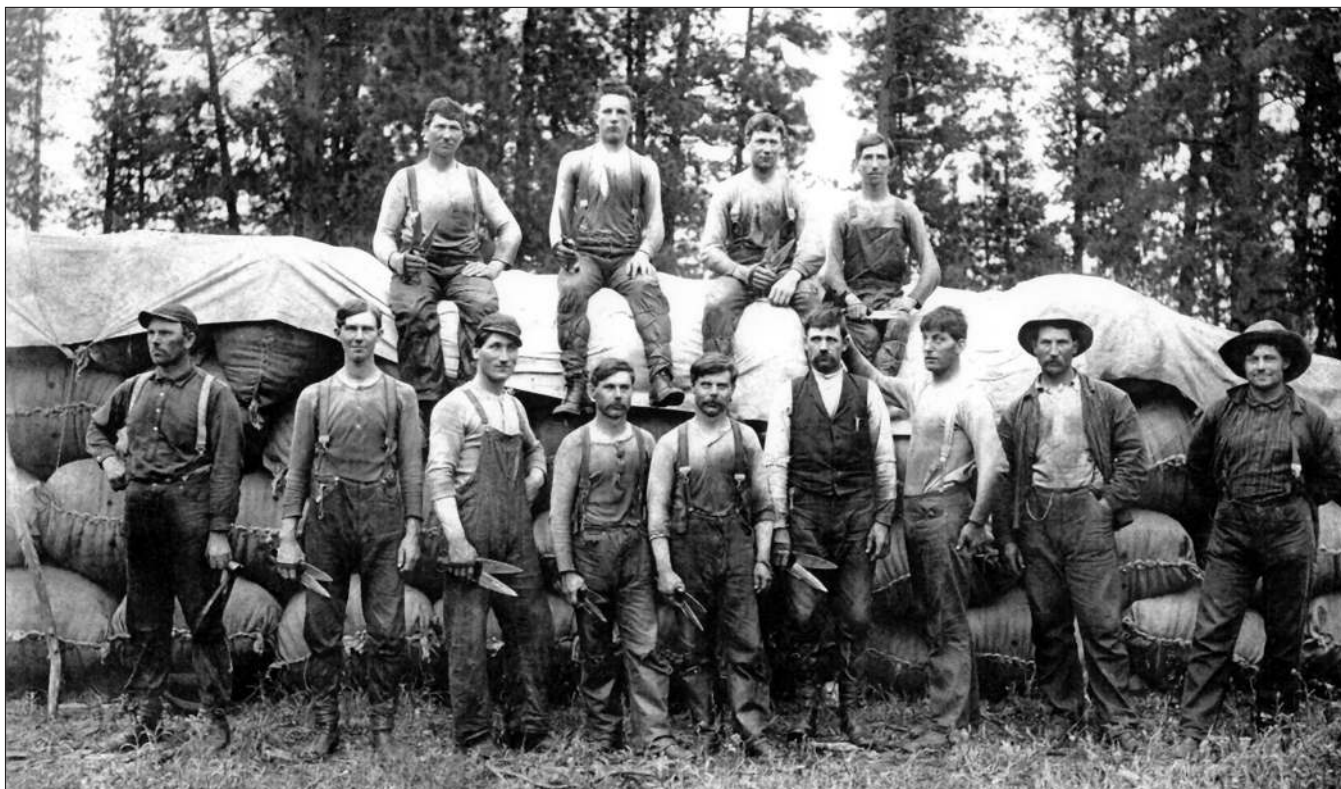
While still in his very early childhood, Ernest Johnson was compelled to assist his father with the operation of the ranch, and was given but limited educational advantages, his entire schooling covering only a period of eighteen months. The first part of his school years was spent in Summerville, his teacher being Mr. Horner, who is now Professor Horner of Oregon Agricultural College.

His father moved to Wallowa Valley and built just below the present home of Mr. Johnson. Due to high water and other obstacles, this place was abandoned and another home was built by the Warm Springs in Lower Valley. While in Lower Valley, a few more fleeting months in the little log schoolhouse, near the present Boyd place, completed the eighteen months of attendance. After leaving home, he worked on a stock ranch in Wallowa County. Immediately after attaining his majority, he filed on a homestead in Promise that formed the nucleus of his present ranch. In connection with the cultivation of his homestead, he also engaged in the sheep business. He soon found that the Promise country was not well suited for sheep as might be, so he sold out at a sale and bought a ranch on the Imnaha, where the steep hills held the sheep in peaceful oblivion. He is now located in Lower Valley and is one of the well-known sheep raisers of Wallowa Valley, as well as one of the most substantial ranchmen.

*April 1911*  
Expenses out of sheep for 1 year

1500 ewes at cost 4.22 each	\$6,330.00
Wages needed at 50¢ head 12 months	450.00
Interest on investment (Winter and Spring range)	600.00
20000 lbs. of 15¢	3000.00
Other lands leased for range	300.00
Reserve fee for summer range	900.00
Handling 8 months at 10¢/month/ewe	5900.00
Comstocking 9 months @ 20¢	3600.00
Board for 4 months Comstocking at 12¢/head	288.00
Shearing 600 ewes @ 3¢/head	1800.00
Marketing 600 ewes at 15¢/head	9000.00
Storage 1000 lbs. wool @ 2¢/lb	2000.00
Provisional, feeding and shearing 12 months	1750.00
Cost of 4 horses, saddle, Oregon, Comstock, etc 1200.00	1200.00
Average loss 3¢ @ 1500 ewes	4500.00
By 80% lambing 1200 @ 20¢/head 5¢ cut	2200.00
So call number 125	750.00
Little about	20.00
Over average 8¢ @ 127500 (subject to 17900)	107250.00
4 ewes at 15¢ for 12 months 17900	29850.00
By profit on 12 months of 19000	22800.00
So credit early liquidation interest	
At breeding house and 600 ewes 6 months	
and by books for breeding	5323.50

Account of Ernest Johnson’s sheep “expenses” for 1911. Figures show average cost per head for “running sheep 12 months on range” to be \$24.71, and “average proceeds” to be \$28.39, making an “average profit per head” of \$3.68.



Ernest F. Johnson's sheep shearing crew

Top row, from left: Ed Anderson, Roy Schaeffer, Charley Bramlet, Johnny Phillips. Bottom row, from left: Bob Palmer, George Werst, J. Ray Johnson, Dixon twins, Nathen Bramlet, Bill Maxwell, Ernest Johnson, Jasper Werst

In 1899 at Promise, Mr. Johnson was married to Miss Myrtle Powell, a daughter of Winfield S. and Mary Powell, and to them have been born eight children. They are as follows: Lola, Hubert, Eugene, Ivan, Clifford, Ada, Howard and Reid.

### Active Interest Taken in Politics

Mr. Johnson has taken an active interest in politics. This is proved by his two successful terms as county commissioner of Wallowa County, serving from 1915 until 1922. He is now serving as president of the Stockgrowers & Farmers National Bank of Wallowa, and president of the Oregon Hardware and Implement Co. of Wallowa.

In a reminiscent mood, Mr. Johnson told of the first county seat which was located at Joseph; and very quickly drew an outline of Wallowa, including rivers, creeks and general lay of country, all of which is too detailed for one discussion and which may form material for another article. Surely he has served a full apprenticeship as scout of this county, and apparently could very easily serve another.

### Bed Made in Snow

One day in the near past, while standing beside the old, dim outline of the stage road that used to traverse Smith Mountain, Mr. Johnson remarked that "I traveled that road ten years before the present one was built. When I was only six weeks old, my father crossed this mountain. When a stop was made to rest weary horses, I was taken out of the rig and laid on a blanket on the snow."

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*As a member you receive three free copies of  
historical photographs from our archives, and  
10% off your purchase of regional history books.*

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As a matter of mention, the only road entering Wallowa Valley at that time was one crossing Smith Mountain. “Further,” he said, “I can remember when almost any day you chose you could see from 300 to 500 Indians camped between the Warm Springs and the head of the canyon.”

Mr. Johnson very aptly expressed his philosophy of life in just a few words when he said, “The problem is not to live to learn, but to learn to live.” We of the present day have a similar story, but different, yes, altogether different. “Not the good that comes to us but the good that comes from the world through us is the measure of our success.” Earnest Johnson may be said to be an extremely successful man.



Wool freighters in the Wallowa Valley, early 1900s

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