

# 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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## Leo Returns to the Wallowa Country

*In 1970, Leo Michael Boots Shannon of Auburn, Washington, returned to the Wallowa Country to visit the scenes of his youth. Soon he began writing to Rev. Martin Quigley about his recollections. The following stories are from those letters.*

Our family came to Troy, Wallowa County, Oregon, from Rock Springs, Wyoming, where I worked in the coal mines and learned all about mules the hard way as a stable boy underground. As a 14-year-old I drove four horses and a freight wagon in Troy. After returning, I realized I must have been a pretty tough kid. We moved from Troy to the Enterprise area. My father died in the Joseph area as a result of a fall from a horse. He had a dog with him, and when the dog returned home we started the search and determined he had probably lived for a couple of day after the fall. We felt the dog probably stayed with him while he was still alive.

When the last shovel of dirt was placed on Father's grave, there we stood—a mother, seven children (with me the oldest at just 15), four horses, a wagon, and a homestead that father had just filed on. No money, no buildings of any sort on the bare homestead land. So we set up a tent until we got a house built late in the fall. The homesteaders helped build the house with my brothers' and my help, and then I made the furniture.

*In 1917 during World War I, Leo joined the U.S. Marine Corp. After his discharge, he was returning to Wallowa County when he stopped in La Grande, where he had an interview with the Superintendent of Schools. Because he had not attended school since the age of 11, Leo, like other returning veterans, wanted to graduate from high school. Making this more complicated for Leo was the fact that his old school had burned, along with his records.*

We met with the principal, who proved to be a tremendous and understanding man, and I was registered and appointed military instructor. During my time in La Grande I made friends with some of the railroaders. They were more of my element. One of these friends was Mr. Barnwell, who was an engineer on a "helper," which were the big Malleys that pushed the freight trains over the grades both ways [over the Blue Mountains] out of La Grande. When I would get word that Barnwell was to take a train over the mountain, I would go to the yard and when they whistled out, I would swing up in his engine and they would let me fire it. We would return in time for me to make it to school with little sleep, but still happy and relieved.

I met Glen Conkey, a graduate whose father owned the Conkey Lumber Company at Minam. I obtained summer employment from Mr. Conkey and was instructed to get out of school as soon as I could and join

the river-driving crew. The timber was cut and decked some 25 miles upriver during the winter, and then when the spring flood came the decks were dumped into the river and the logs driven down to the dam and boom at Minam, where they were reduced to lumber.

These were very dangerous log drives. The river was fast and the water a raging torrent. We kept hog wire fencing stretched across the river below us to catch any man who was unlucky enough to fall in when no one could reach him with a pike pole. It was a daily occurrence for someone to get flipped off a crooked log or have a peavey hook slip and send a man into the river. Someone was always nursing a wound from a pike pole hook, for when you went after a man in the river, you intended to catch him on the first try or you might not have a second chance.



Log drive on the Minam River



Dam on the Minam River at Minam

our fingernails turned blue, we would come ashore and drink a tin cup of very strong coffee that a flunkey was keeping hot over a nearby fire.

Going to work in the morning at daylight was always a dangerous time. You were inclined to tippy-toe over the logs, trying to avoid the ice-cold water. But the experienced men on the crew claimed that we un-wet "hogs" were a danger to them. So they insisted that the first order of business in the morning was us jumping into some shallow place and getting wet.

The unmarried men worked the center jams, which were the most dangerous. The idea was to find a key log that had started a center jam, and when this key log was moved, the whole jam began to move and logs would tumble in all directions. When any member of the crew saw the least movement in the jam, he would yell at the top of his lungs. Then we would all skip over the top of one of the boats on either side to get away from these jams in all haste. The water was near the temperature of ice, and much of the time the drivers kept wet to their waist, and when



Sawmill at Minam

It was on these log drives that I learned something about catching colds. A river-driver never took his clothes off until they were dry. To accomplish this, a flunkey always had several fires going some ten feet or so apart when the drivers came to camp from the river. We removed our caulk shoes and socks and put on dry socks and slippers until we were dry from standing about near the fires. It was a most interesting time during these drying-out periods, for this was the time for arguments, discussions, and very tall tales. We always saved one log each, and the crew rode these into the pond, where the mill was ready to commence sawing. The pond above the boom proved to be an attractive swimming hole to which people came for picnics and swimming.



Swimming at “the pond above the boom”

## Home From War

### February 23, 1919

Word has been received in Wallowa that five of the Wallowa boys with Base Hospital No. 15, who left home nearly two years ago, are on their way home, having sailed from France on the 5<sup>th</sup> of the month. They are Eugene Alford, Ralph Couch, Ray Hendricks, Charles Richards, and Harold Soden. Their many friends will be glad to know that they will be home again in a couple of weeks.

### March 13, 1919

A decidedly pleasing event was the dinner and social afternoon following given by Mrs. Neil Cameron at the Cameron House on Sunday, March 9, in honor of the returning soldier boys. The table was very pleasingly decorated; a group of flags of the Allies surmounted by our national emblem formed a center piece with streamers of red, white, and blue to each plate ending in fancily decorated place cards held by a small American flag. At one end of the room, a beautiful large silk flag was displayed.

The five-course dinner was thoroughly enjoyed by the guests, and after the tables were cleared, music, both instrumental and vocal, and stories of camp, army and trench life wiled away the hours. The guests of the day were Sergeant Ross Hood, Corporal William Clay, Privates Glenn Cramer, Hugh Dougherty, W.C. Clemens, John Bratton, Ray McKenzie, Peter Brandon, and Joe Hilton. Mrs. Cameron was ably assisted by Mr. and Mrs. J. M Bledsoe, Mrs. Myrtle Footberg, Misses Flora Allen, Margaret Forstad, Wanda Sain, Mary Randall, Geneva Powell, Mary Lambert, and Lorene Richards. In the evening Mr. and Mrs. Edwin Marvin entertained several of the soldier boys at luncheon with several of their friends.

### April 3, 1919

Three of the Wallowa boys, who were the first to enlist at the outset of the war, enlisting in the hospital corps, arrived home this week from overseas. On Friday Harold Soden and Charles Richards came in, and on Sunday Ralph Couch arrived. There many friends were glad to see them home again.

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Wallowa History Center  
PO Box 481 • Wallowa, Oregon 97885  
E-mail: mburrows@eoni.com

*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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## Grouse Notes

*Wallowa County Chieftain*

November 3, 1899

Hiram Merry is on his way home from a visit with his parents at Touchet and with him are two brothers and a sister who will follow by train and stage. She will be in charge of the house and keep the boys fat.

*Wallowa County Chieftain*

October 31, 1902

Ficker & Bartlett are moving their store down to the mouth of Little Salmon [Wenaha River].

Howard Moore and Leonard Smith left this week for Lewiston after two loads of freight for Koch's Store.

An eastern man was in the Grouse neighborhood recently, inquiring for homes for five families. He was informed that several parties had their ranches and would sell cheap. He replied that he would not live in a country so far from market and no roads, no schoolhouses, no churches. He said we cannot afford to give up all these advantages and risk the future prospects. "The soil is fine and productive, and I see some of the finest orchards among you people that I have seen in the West," he said, "but you have no market for your products, your wheat costs you 50 cents per bushel, and you feed it out to your hogs at a loss of 10 cents per bushel."

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