

# Wallowa History Center

*Preserving Our Past for the Future*

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

– Newsletter Number 9 • January 2008 –

## Homesteading on Smith Mountain Wallowa County, Oregon

By Marion Fisher Mecklem

The following is adapted from a letter written by Marion Fisher Mecklem (1893-1981) to her younger sister Alice in the mid to late 1970s. The Fisher homestead on Smith Mountain was located just downstream from today's Minam State Park.

The answer to your question about our settling on Smith Mountain is so clear in my mind. The year I am not too sure of, but as I remember John must have been about 8½ years, me 7½, and Sylvan around 6 years, so that would have been about the year 1899. You are so right about hard times. And surely about the hard work, but very wrong about it being lonely for the folks with only “little kids” for company.

We were their little helpers and for our age worked as hard as they did. Of course, the first thing Dad did was to build a large tent house—had a board floor and a wood-burning sheet-iron stove with a flat top so one could cook on it. Then he prepared about a half-acre of ground and had it all ready for planting when we arrived.

After they taught us how, the garden was our job, all but the hardest jobs. Even little Sylvan, six years old, dropped corn as I dug holes. We also worked from light to dark, and would have only a few hours to explore and play. Believe me, no one was ever lonely—perhaps only dear Mom, I guess, as she was very lonely being away from her folks for the first time.



Marion F. Mecklam



As I remember, the month was April, with some snow still on the ground in places. We had been left with Grandpa and Grandma at Gales Creek, Oregon, and they put us on the Columbia River boat at Portland, and Dad met us at The Dalles with a covered wagon. It's too long a story to write all the days of that trip, but I loved every minute.

From our camp on a farm in Elgin, we went on over the old Wallowa Canyon road, where we camped on the John McCulloch place. The next night we stayed at the Victor place. The only road on to Smith Mountain was up a rough canyon that reached the old Dixon Place.

It was a terrible washed-out canyon road, and it took Grandpa Victor and the two older boys, Oscar and Lester, and Bob Crawford to help us drive up it with an extra team of horses.

Past the old Victor place at the toll bridge at Minam and near the schoolhouse was the old Dixon place. Just inside the gate was a little log cabin belonging to Bob Crawford where we stayed overnight. It had only a dirt floor. Johnny and me slept on the straw in one corner, and Mom and Sylvan were on the only bunk. Dad and Bob slept under the wagons. Sunrise the next day we drove on to our place.

I don't know what ever happened to Bob Crawford. He left the mountain soon after we came. Several squatters lived there for a time, then Harry Wade preempted it, and after Old Lou Wade's husband—Harry's cousin—died she moved in with Harry. This was very much disapproved of by all the good ladies of Smith Mountain.

Father was a surveyor, and later, when guys started coming in to homestead and take timber claims, he would meet them at the stage at Minam and locate their claims for them. Most were young businessmen from Boise, Portland, and even Seattle who would be interested only in using their timber rights and not spend the time to “prove up” on homesteads. They would sell the standing timber to big lumber firms and pay Father by selling him the stump land at a very reasonable price. It was all virgin timber and so equal in value. Dad would locate them on adjoining claims of 160 acres. That way Dad acquired most of all our rangeland and eventually acquired lots of stock and rented pasture and looked after the stock of men from Elgin and many from the valley.

Old Lou Wade really had a good heart and very much disapproved of Dad and Mom sending me, when I was about 14 years old, down to Minam with an extra horse to meet the stage and bring up the young men. Lou stopped me on one of my trips and asked if any of those guys ever tried to touch me. She almost told me “the fact of life” and told me to always have my quirt strap tight on my wrist, never to dismount, and if ever they tried to approach my horse's head to ask them to stay away, as my horse did not like strangers, and if they tried anything to quirt them across the face. Anyway, old Lou was always good to children.

There was a cabin and an old horse lean-to high on the old switch-back at the old John Fine place. (There was no road then; several years later, when more people had moved on Smith Mountain, all the men and big boys built that road.) John Fine had moved away long before we came. Our timber line joined his

and took in about one-third of the canyon. Oscar Victor later acquired the place. At the end of that mile-long ridge behind our first homestead, Dad located a young unmarried man in his late twenties named Allen, so we called it Allen's Ridge.

We kids liked him, and early on the day that Stanley was born, Dad told us that Mom did not feel well, so we were to spend the day with Mr. Allen, and that Dad would go get Grandma Lovely. She was a darling—smoked a corn cob pipe and was a wonderful midwife. Mr. Allen brought us kids home just as the sun was setting, and we found Mom in bed with a little baby.



Fisher family, from left: Marion, Johnny, father John, Sylvan, mother Elizabeth

Were we ever happy! He was my live doll, and I had all care of him except nursing. Washed and ironed all his long starched dresses and changed and washed his diapers.

You spoke of hard times! Dad had saved enough money for a little seed for our first crop. The second winter he left Mom and us three little ones alone and took a job camp tending for a sheepman in Weiser, Idaho, returning in time for spring planting. What a terrible winter we had. We ran out of food—flour, cornmeal, everything but meat and potatoes. We had one team of horses, Maude and Dick, and one little pony that the dear old Umatilla chief “No Shirt” gave us kids because Dad let him continue fishing in the Wallowa River and camping on our river property. The pony was a very unusual color, almost a blue, so we named him Blue Boy.

Finally, Mother decided she would have to leave us little ones alone and drive to Elgin for food. Johnny was about 10, me 8½, and Sylvan 7. Mother left about 3 a.m. with Maude and Dick and hoped to be home around midnight. We had a huge oblong heating stove with a flat top one could cook on, and she told us to burn only a very small fire and stay in the big bed, which was near the stove, if we got too cold. We were also to go upstairs to the attic and check the stove pipe and watch for fire burn—and we used no lamps, only our two lanterns. There was little chance of fire as the roof was covered with snow, but we took up a couple of pails of water, and about every twenty minutes Johnny and I would take turns going up to check. We made Sylvan stay in bed. We were so tired we would take turns taking a nap.

When morning came, Johnny milked our cow and built up a low fire and chipped some dried venison into a quart of milk and boiled it. That was all we had to eat while she was gone. When she had not arrived by 11 a.m., we were sure her wagon must have gone off the Minam Hill road, so Johnny decided to go and find her. He doused the stove fire with water and made me promise to stay in bed with Sylvan until he and Mom came back. We hoped and prayed to God all the time.

He returned sometime in the afternoon. He had met Mother on the Minam grade, and she had him hurry home to us. Old Dick had gone lame on his right leg out on Cricket Flat and could only hobble along on his good three legs and his valiant heart. Mother had to stay overnight at the Hartley place, and the poor old horse had to hobble all the way home from there. You can imagine our joy when we saw Mother coming over the hill just before sunset.

Our father went out to work for two more winters, but he made sure we were well-supplied with food.

The third spring he came home riding a lovely bay horse and a nice donkey and jenny for us kids. How we loved them as pets and how heart-broken when that jenny died giving birth to a colt.

When we first came every one had to go to Wallowa for mail, so Father got up a petition requesting a post office on Smith Mountain. Because Grandma Lovely had become badly crippled with lumbago and had a little log cabin near the schoolhouse, everyone agreed that Grandma was to be post mistress. It was approved and named Lovely, Oregon. She would sit in her rocking chair smoking her old corn cob pipe in front of her old fireplace with hot stones at her aching back. We kids, Johnny and me and other neighbor kids, would split wood and keep her wood box filled. All the mothers would send her baked bread, pies and cakes, and cooked roasts.



Marion (left) and her sister Alice, to whom Marion sent the original letter about homestead life on Smith Mt.

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

---

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.*

---

*The Wallowa Sun*  
January 18, 1923

## K.K.K. Crosses Notify City of Klan Activity

Two fiery crosses Saturday evening gave notice that the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan are active in the county. One of the crosses was placed near the Frick Bakery, while the other was located on the cement bridge near the creamery. The burning crosses were put into place at about eight in the evening, there being no clue as to the identity of the K.K.K. men. A similar cross burned at Lostine November 24.

*The Wallowa Sun*  
March 22, 1923

## K.K.K Lecturer Tells of Ideals of the Klan

Rev. W.A. Greisman of Pendleton explained to a fair sized audience at McLean's Theatre Thursday the ideals and methods of the Ku Klux Klan. He spoke of the principles of Americanism which the organization was trying to promulgate, and explained their methods and the opposition to the order which led to the entitling of his lecture "The Truth about the Ku Klux Klan."

---

*Thanks to Ron and Celine Gay of Shell Mercantile  
for providing the space for the Wallowa History Center.*