

# 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 10 • June 2008 –

## The Town of Wallowa

By Mary Ann Burrows

The following information is taken from the writings of C.T. McDaniel and H.W. Oliver.

Wallowa is located in the northeastern corner of Oregon on the Wallowa River. Until the early 1870s, the Wallowa Mountains and the Wallowa band of the Nez Perce Indians provided a barrier to the settlement of this area. In 1872, the Bramlet, Findley, Johnson, Powers, Schaeffer, and Tulley families came into the area seeking homes and farms here, in the lower section of the Wallowa Valley. In 1873, a post office was established near Wallowa, the first post office in what was later to become Wallowa County.

In 1878, one dwelling stood in the area that was to become the town of Wallowa. This dwelling was built by Hugh Canfield. Lucian Cole had the original homestead for the land on which much of the town was built. The Cole log cabin was located on the south side of what is now Highway 82. The approximate location was what is now a home at 408 Highway 82.



Town of Wallowa, near turn of 20th century

In 1885 Matt Johnson (or Johnston) purchased half an acre from Lucian Cole and erected a two story building for a store located near the Cole log cabin. The second floor was used for community gatherings. Another business located near the store was a blacksmith shop operated by Henry (Ben) Gerber. Johnson hired H.W. Oliver to take charge of the store.

On December 31, 1885, \$500 of merchandise was brought in by two teams from the rail head at La Grande, which was the closest rail point at the time. (The tracks had reached La Grande just one year earlier.) Mr. Oliver lived at the Cole cabin while he worked at the store. On New Years Eve, the community celebrated the store's opening with music by Lee Maxwell and Dave Hearing. Mr. Johnson, however, went bankrupt in 1887 and sold to Mr. Sproston.

In 1889, the homestead was sold to Island City Mercantile and Milling Company, which platted the future town of Wallowa. They constructed a store, mill, and other businesses that were leased or sold to new settlers.

On February 3, 1899, the act to incorporate the city was approved. J.P. Morelock, Justice of the Peace for the Wallowa District, appointed James Wright, W.R. Couch, and O.W. Corkins as officers for the election to be held April 4 of that year. In this election, John McDonald, Jr. was elected mayor; council members elected for two years were Henry Gerber, C.A. Hunter, and E.A. Holmes. Council members elected for one year were William Sherod and Dr. G.W. Gregg; the city recorder was J.P. Morelock, and the treasurer was Theo Williams.

The town's first newspaper was published on March 3, 1899 by C.T. McDaniel. It consisted of four pages; two were "ready-print"—national and international news had already been printed on them—and the two inside pages were printed locally and contained community news and advertisements.

The same year, a school was built to serve 300 students in grades 1-8, and Leonard Couch opened the Wallowa Academy to provide classes in business, academic, and "normal" (the name given to courses for prospective teachers) subjects. The same year, 19 businesses were listed in the *City Directory*, and the Methodists built a Gothic-style church on First Street. The town grew fast; the population was 620 in 1890, and 1,010 in 1910.

The Marvin Brothers and John Huber were among the first to operate sawmills, which provided lumber for new homes and businesses. The Nibley-Mimnaugh mill was built in 1908, the same year that the O.R. & N. railroad reached Wallowa.



Sidewalk scene from early Wallowa, undated

The growth of Wallowa, however, involved more than just the coming of businesses. As J.A. Tulley, an early Wallowa settler, wrote at the time in his description of the Wallowa Valley:

“The beautiful rolling prairie, spread out in all its primeval loveliness, skirted on every side by hills and with precipitous, rugged mountains projected against the southern and eastern sky, was covered with a great wealth of luxuriant grass, forming one of the most pleasing pictures that could be hung on memory's walls.”

# Moving to Wallowa

By Minnie Gregg

The following is an excerpt from *My Yesterdays*, a memoir written by Minnie Gregg, the wife of Dr. G.W. Gregg. The Gregg Family left Wallowa in 1909. They have donated photos and this story.

In the spring of 1897, Dr. Gregg, who had established a practice in Summerville, Oregon, had become a little restless, and one of our druggists had moved to Wallowa, and he urged Dr. Gregg to come over and look the situation over and maybe it would suit him. So he went over and got so busy that he could not get back, and I got my orders to pack up and come over. I did all the packing and found transportation for our belongings. A friend took his horse and buggy for our baby daughter and I to ride in.

Now it is not far to go by auto with the better roads, but then it was a full day's ride. You have no idea what country we passed through; part was hilly and miles of the Cricket Flat country. Then we came to the "jumping off place" [where] we had to go down a mountain so steep you felt like you would pitch on your face, then twist around to get on the big bridge that crossed the Minam River, almost at the place where it empties into the Wallowa River.

I hated to go down that mountain. Sometimes I got out and walked, but you can't do that very well with a baby, so I was forced to ride even if I fell on my face. But I was fortunate and got along fine.

We started along the mountain canyon. They had a crude hotel built there where stages stopped to change horses, and in the winter to thaw out. The beautiful Wallowa River was on our right, and on our left the scene varied—some wall, [made up of] brush and trees. It was not a bad drive if you knew just what you might strike around the corner.

An old friend of mine told me she was on the stage when they met a freighter loaded, so that meant the vehicle with the smallest load would have to be torn apart and carried around piece by piece.

After getting through the canyon there are five or six miles yet to go.

There was not one church in the town [of Wallowa]. They used the school house for a union Sunday school, but we had a M.E. [Methodist] minister come once a month.



Minam Hill, the "jumping off place" to the Wallowa Valley



Canyon House in the Wallowa Canyon, a hotel and stagestop for travelers

# 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.*

---

I remember one call the Dr. had [about] 1898. It was way over in the Flora country, some sixty miles from Wallowa. He always drove two horses, and this time he started in a sleigh. He drug through the mud for a mile or two, then struck snow until he reached Flora. There he found a big sled waiting for him that took him to the Grande Ronde River, where he was put on a ferry. The last part of the trip was on a horse. How they found the house is a mystery to me. When the people discovered there was a doctor in the area they decided they would make use of him, so it was three days before he returned to Wallowa.



The Gregg home in Wallowa

*The Wallowa Sun* (1906)

## Creamery Completed and Received

The stock holders of the Wallowa Building Association held a meeting Saturday and received the creamery from the contractor DeVall. The creamery will be in operation by the first of the month, then the demand for creamery butter will be met.

---

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