

# 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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– Newsletter Number 11 • January 2009 –

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## Early Memories of Bear Creek Area

By Hugh Hayes (1891-1978)

Written on October 11, 1968 at his home on Bear Creek in Wallowa, Oregon

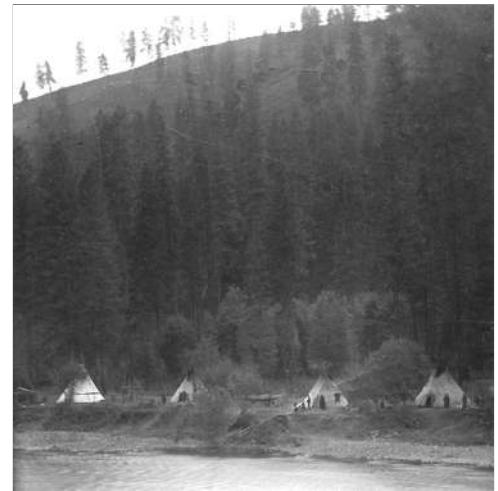
**W**e moved to Wallowa County in the spring of 1895 in a covered wagon. It was a very rough ride with no springs on the wagon. We moved to a log house northwest of Wallowa on the land where the sawmill was. We lived there for a while and then moved to the house back of [what was later] Burrows Cafe, which was called the Keeler house.

While living there, lots of Indians used to come into the valley to hunt and fish. I remember when a band of them were going by. I was in the yard watching them, and some of them rode over to talk to me. They wanted something. It sounded like they said, “Hit the hike,” and believe me, I did. I got my older brother to talk to them. All they wanted was some cabbage we had in the garden. They used to catch lots of salmon and other fish in the river. They would catch quite a few on horseback. They seemed to have a big time.

When they were fishing you could hear them yell for a long ways. They used to have sweat huts in the valley. The one I remember best was southwest of Wallowa [off Bear Creek Road] by a cold spring which they dammed up and made into a pond. They would put hot rocks in the hut and cover it with blankets and skins, and

crawl in and get hot and sweaty and then jump into the cold water. They would yell like blazes. I always did admire the Indians. They always remembered a person.

I don’t remember how long we lived in the Keeler house, but my father bought some land right across the street [today’s Highway 82] and built a house right where the [Methodist] church now stands. This was the first house built on that [south] side of the road, as there were no streets then, and all the land was farmed to the hill [Tick Hill] and west to the Mike Waller place. Part of, or maybe all, of the house is still in use today. It was moved and used as a hospital with more [rooms] added.



Nez Perce lodges near Wallowa



Nez Perce sweat lodge

Also, the land west of Burrows' was farmed to the road running west and east of Shorty McKenzie's store [on today's truck route north of downtown]. There was no schoolhouse where it is now. The school was about a half-mile west and north of Wallowa at that time [near the junction of today's Bear Creek Road and Lower Diamond Prairie Road].

As us boys grew up, my folks bought 60 acres on southwest Bear Creek, which had an old house on it which was on the west side of the creek. It was somewhat dangerous at times. But the folks built a new house on the east side of the creek, close to the road, which was a lot safer going to school. [Both houses stood near today's first concrete bridge across Bear Creek.]

At that time, you were practically in the wilderness. There was a very heavy growth of timber from the Wallowa River on up the creek. It would average better than a fourth-of-a-mile wide, and there were lots of trees three and four feet through, some six or eight feet through, better timber than I have seen for



Early sawmill near Wallowa

years anywhere. Timber in those earlier days was not thought to be worth very much. There was some lumber sawed at some very small mills and most was used to build with, without being planed. In fact, I have some boards in my sheep shed which must be 70 or more years since it was cut. There was solid timber at that time on Smith Mountain and from the Minam and Wallowa rivers east as far as Crow Creek, the very finest pine that ever grew in this part of Oregon. I never thought I would ever see it cut and logged.

I was working for a sheep man over on the breaks of Big Canyon years ago. We were cutting wood for the cook at the lambing camp. I was pretty good on a cross-cut saw as I was not very old. After we got the wood cut, the boss said I was a good sawyer. He said in a few years I would be getting \$40 or \$50 a month cutting logs in that region. I was getting either \$30 or \$35 a month helping with the lambing.

At that time, I never thought [the trees] would ever be logged off, as it was very steep and rough land. But today the timber is gone, that is, the large trees. There is some second growth coming in, and if it is protected from fire, will eventually make lumber. The timber company used to pile and burn the slashing each fall, but they don't seem to do it any more. So to me, it looks like a tornado has hit where they log any more. In earlier days, they logged with horses and did not tear up the ground. There was very little brush in the timber 70 years ago, nothing but big trees.

One reason, I think, was that when a fire got started, it was not put out till the fall rains or snow put it out. There were lots of fires, most set by cattlemen and also by the Indians.

There were very few deer in the country in the earlier 1900s. I was between 15 and 18 before I ever saw one. The people hunted [in] winter, and any time they saw a track of a deer or elk. The homesteaders did most of the slaying of the game. I have known of hunters hunting a week up Bear Creek and in the winter and never even seeing a deer track.

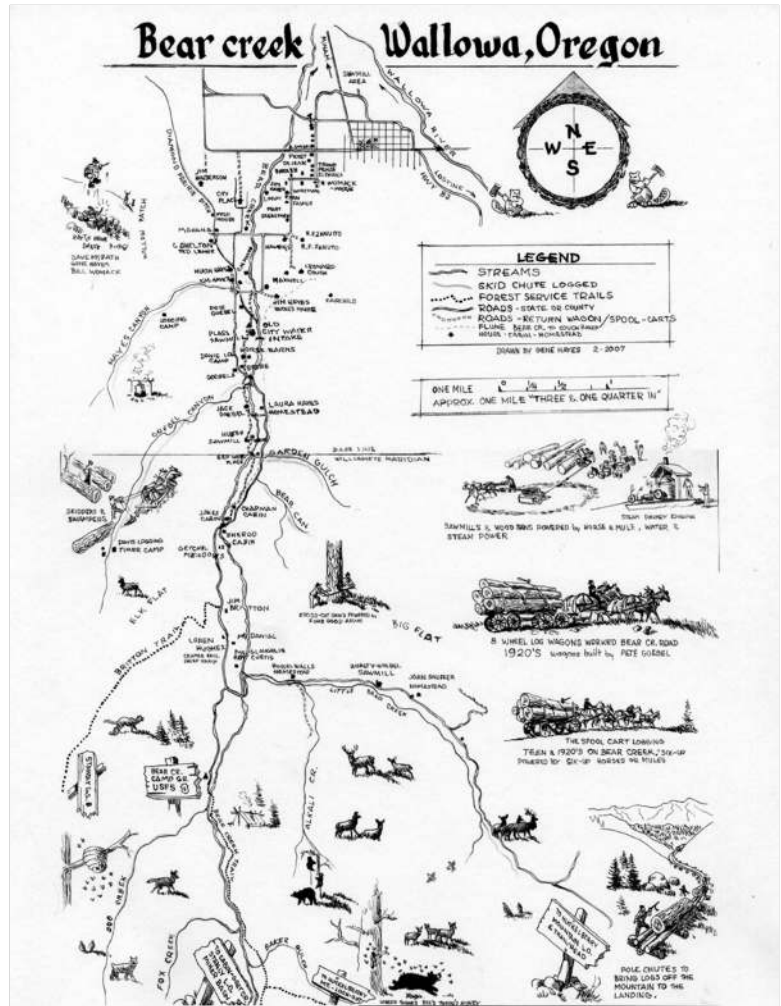
There were quite a few mountain sheep in the mountains in 1898 till well into 1900, but they were in the roughest mountains and were really hard to get, but they [hunters] did get quite a lot of them. To my notion, they were the best game animal that ever lived in Wallowa County. I think they eventually were

annihilated by lead poison [bullets], not by disease as some seem to think.

There was always lots of coyotes, bear, and cougar. I used to hunt coyotes in the summer on what they call Diamond Prairie. At that time, no one lived there. There was the ranch west of it known as the McDonald place, also the Sykes place by the river on the northwest, and the old Marsh Davis place on the northeast on Bear Creek. The land was very rocky and had only bunchgrass like the hills have today. In fact, I believe quite a lot of it was homesteaded under the Desert Act. I have seen it change hands at from \$3 to \$5 an acre.

I believe it was in the early 1900s that homesteaders started to homestead in the timbered country of Smith Mountain, Grossman, and Promise country. About every 160 acres had a family or bachelor living on it. There also were families living on the open land north [of Wallowa] and also on Whiskey Creek. Leap county also. They all seemed to make a living raising most of their food. Kept a few cows and raised their own meat. I have eaten at lots of these places, and I still think it was better food than we have today, for taste and energy.

I knew almost all of the farmers and homesteaders at the time from Lostine to the Grande Ronde River. Some are still around but are getting very scarce. There were quite a few school districts around at that time.



Bear Creek map showing old homesteads and logging sites, by Gene Hayes, son of Hugh Hayes



Bear Creek, near site of former Hayes residence

I knew quite a few of the earliest settlers...These residents were the finest neighbors and citizens that I ever saw. Very few had very much money, and all were about equal financially. I knew a lot more people in the valley than than I do now.

*This issue of the Wallowa History Center Newsletter marks its fifth anniversary.*

# *Wallowa History Center*

*Preserving Our Past for the Future*

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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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*The Wallowa Sun*  
September 14, 1906

## **Business Changes in Wallowa**

**W**ithin a few weeks many changes will be noticed in Wallowa's business places. The W.M. and M. Co. will be in the possession of Shell and Co. Rousavell and Marvin will have a full line of general merchandise. T.L. Davis opens a new meat market; Van Duyn's racket [five- and ten-cent] store will occupy the Tulley building; W. M. & M Co. will receive their patrons in their hardware and machinery establishment. McClellan, of La Grande, will take charge of the drug store which he purchased recently from T Williams. When the successor with the post office is appointed, Mr. Williams will be at the new stand lately owned by Mae McGregor.

*The Wallowa Sun*  
January 26, 1912

**T**he new Troy Hotel is completed at Troy and "Central" [telephone] has moved to that building. Pearl Silvers is the "Hello" girl. The old hotel is now occupied by M. Murphy and family.

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