

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.*

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Day Ridge

by Sidney Casteel

(Sidney M. Casteel was born in Flora in 1902, and died in Maupin in 1996 at the age of 93. In between he graduated from Wallowa High School, served in World War II, worked as a rancher and a Realtor, owned several sawmills, and played in a jazz band.)

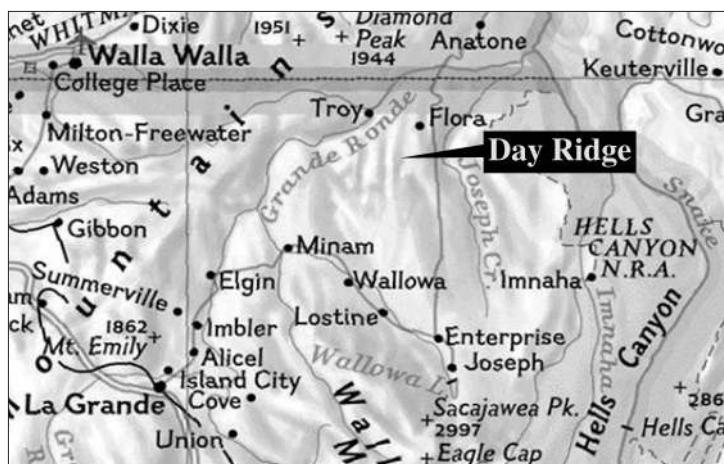
And in the beginning, Mother Nature said, “Now that I have created this great, big beautiful World, I must do something to show the inhabitants thereof that there is another side to this project.” And so She created Day Ridge (one of the few things which I have ever held against that Lady).

Day Ridge is one of a series of ridges running north and south from Joseph Creek on the south to the Grande Ronde River on the north. The Ridge is a strip of land approximately 25 miles long. The part of it that was settled by homesteads is only 15 to 18 miles in length, and lies between Mud Creek and Courtney Creek. The first settlers filed on Day Ridge land in the 1880s and '90s; in 1916 or '17, an estimated 28 farms or ranches occupied the Ridge. Shortly after those years, the Ridge population began to diminish quite rapidly.

The climate in the Day Ridge area was quite severe, ranging from a low of 42 degrees below zero in the winter, to 105 degrees in the summer. I have seen four-and-a-half feet of snow on the level in the winter, and from three to four feet was average. Snow was expected about November 1 and would last well into April.



Sid Casteel



On the south end of the Ridge, the elevation was over 4,000 feet and considerably lower as the Ridge graduated north, down towards the Grande Ronde River and the little town of Troy, which was very important to the people who lived on that end of the Ridge.

Troy is where those folks received their mail and could purchase needed supplies. From the Ridge to the town was a well-worn trail which required a pack horse if any quantity of merchandise was to be transported.

The post office and shopping for the south end of the Ridge was in the little town of Flora, which consisted of two general stores, a blacksmith shop, a flour mill, a saw mill, a bank, one doctor, one dentist, a grade school and in later years a high school. The distance from the south portion of the Ridge to Flora was 20 miles by the better road, and 12 miles through a steep, twisting, tortuous double trail that was used occasionally, and that would take over four hours to negotiate with a team and buggy.

No doubt I harbor some bitterness about the life that was once in that area. What are my reasons? Namely, that in looking back I think of the 12- and 18-hour days of back-breaking, soul-killing work that each was subjected to just to keep food on the table, and even then there were times when the food was very thin and only enough to survive. Then clearing the land, building a log cabin. The log barns and the outbuildings. Digging wells for water. (No one had running water). Fencing. Building up a small herd of cattle, some sheep, a few hogs and, of course, the horses. The horses gave us our only modes of transportation. And farm work.



The Casteel family about 1915, Sid in back

Please remember! There were no automobiles in those days. No telephones or radio, and the TV was 50 years down the road. Ah yes! After a few years we did manage to get a telephone line in to Flora and our neighborhood. Remember the old battery phone? (And did you ever “rubber” in on the neighbors?) Some animals that helped our food basket—chickens and rabbits and, of course, wild game, though with the exception of grouse, we had very little game.

With regard to the work load, I hasten to emphasize that the women and mothers were the most abused members of the family. Their work was never done, and they seldom left the house, even when the men folk went to town for the

bare necessities. There ladies did the cooking, the canning, the washing and ironing. (The irons were heated on the wood stove.) These ladies tended the garden, cared for the chickens, and helped with the milking. Cared for the milk, churned the butter, and made the cheese. Did all of the sewing, nursed, doctored, bathed and wiped both ends of the children. When a baby was born, these female wonders were the midwives for one another.

If you happened to be lucky enough to have a spring on your land, it would be in a canyon, far from the house. Many times that water was carried in buckets, and often this was the woman’s task, or the kids would often help if they were large enough for the job. Wash day was an all out work day, and most of it was done on the old washboard. All hot water was heated on a wood-burning stoves, and those stoves presented another chore—sawing, splitting and carrying in the wood, The women and the kids also shared in this task. If there is a Heaven, those mothers have a front row seat.

Excluding meat and bread, the garden was where most of our food came from with the exception of items such as sugar, salt, and coffee, which in some instances was considered a luxury. The men plowed and worked the garden patch down to where it was suitable for planting, then the lady usually did most of the planting. Also the women and the kids did most of the cultivating in the garden. (How I hated weeding.)

Caring for the milk and making the butter and cheese were all women’s work; again the children came in handy, especially with the churn. I hated the churn. I always managed to splatter some buttermilk on everything close by, including myself. My mother and my aunt made butter, molded it into two-pound rolls,

and sold or traded it for groceries. Then with the advent of the cream separator, the churning stopped, except for family use, and the cream was sold. And this new piece of machinery called a *separator*? In that day, it was considered quite the invention, and definitely a boon to the farms and ranches. I remember that when we obtained the first one, I could not wait to turn it, but that soon became a chore.

In the families I knew best, the ladies cut and sewed most all clothes for the children and many of the clothes for the older folks. Moccasins for the little ones. Mittens for everyone. Dresses and shirts too. Oh yes—we must not forget the diapers, or as they were called in those days, *diddies*. And those diddies were often made out of bleached flour sacks. So were dish towels made out of those flour sacks. Another item the ladies made was the quilts. I remember seeing my mother and my aunt carding wool to make the heavy quilts, called comforters, and comforters they were when the zero weather came. (No, we did not have electric blankets in those days.)

One of the most difficult and time-consuming tasks for the women folks was canning for the winter months. Garden vegetables, meat, jams, pickles, jelly; in fact, most all edibles. All of these were canned in quart and half-gallon Mason jars. Meat was cured with salt and smoke, and also put down in a brine solution in large stone jars. Chicken was often fried and then stored in the Mason jars, as were eggs, saved for the winter when the hens did not lay. One method of storing eggs was to put them in a water-glass solution, which would harden to the consistency of jelly. Another method was to store them in a box of oats—one layer of eggs standing on the small end, then a layer of oats, then a layer of eggs, etc.

All canned food and anything else to be eaten was stored in the cellar, one of the most important buildings on the ranch. Even though we had no ice, this cellar did a very good job. The cellars I remember were built out of logs approximately 10 or 12 inches in diameter. The cracks were well chinked, then the entire building was covered with 10 or 12 inches of soil, with a small vent in the roof for ventilation. When this building was properly constructed, the temperature inside, summer and winter, would average 40 to 45 degrees.

When it came to picking up the mail at Flora or Troy, some of the neighbors would take turns, especially in the winter, when there were usually periods of two or three months when the only mode of travel to Flora was a pair of skis. With the snowfall of three and four feet, and no equipment to clear the roads, it would at times become impossible to travel in sleighs, bobsleds, or cutters. Even riding a horse for any distance was out of the question. Twelve miles to Flora on skis. Yes, it was done, and those hardy souls who accomplished this feat would return with the mail, but only the letters. Reading material in those days was rather thin, even in good weather when we received or picked up our mail more often. Magazines that I remember were the *Saturday Evening Post* and the *Literary Digest*. As I remember, they cost ten cents. In our house, the stable reading material was the Bible and the dictionary.

Day Ridge at one time supported two one-room schools. One school was located in the south end of the settlements, approximately two miles south and east of the Casteel ranches. It was a little log cabin that had been built by a homesteader and abandoned. In later years a new school building was erected close to the Casteel holdings. The second school was located in the north section, close to the Warnock



Wash day at the Casteel home on Day Ridge, early 1900s, Sid carrying buckets

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ranch, This one had approximately seven children and did not operate but for a few years due to the lack of attendance. In those days, a school year lasted for only six months, though the schedule was sometimes cut short during extreme weather.

Children walked to school. No school busses. Once in a while, some kids would ride a horse, but not frequently. Walking one mile, two miles to school? We thought nothing of it. We learned to read, write, learned our multiplication tables. Of course, most of us learned the three Rs at home. Even with their busy work, our parents took the time to teach the three Rs.

I think the reason I feel a little bitter about that era and the lands such as Day Ridge is that when I look back at the killing labor and the sacrifices made by those pioneers as they worked those lands, and now that most of those areas are empty, I can't help but wonder where is the appreciation for their efforts? They have been forgotten and have never been thanked.

Now I better shut my trap and go cut some wood or do something useful. Excuse the mistakes, and remember that paper is mighty good to start a fire with.



Driving on Day Ridge, early 1900s