Wallowa History Center

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Preserving Our Past for Our Future

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Over the Mountains and Into the Valley: Oliver Newton Bishop (1857–1940)

(Part 1 of 2)

By Melvin Carl Bishop (1883-1969)

(Shared by Carol Lange)

Author's note: My sources of information are what I have heard my father, Oliver Bishop, relate, and what was told to me by Uncle Ephriam Whited, husband of Dessie Bishop Whited. I will tell just as nearly as l can the way he told it to me. (c. 1957)

In the fall of 1877 Oliver Bishop, my father, and John Lent, his second cousin, heard of the Wallowa country and decided to go there. They went to Portland, then took passage on a Columbia River steamer to Umatilla Landing, where freight was unloaded to be hauled by teams to Pendleton and over the Blue Mountains. From here my father and John started afoot with their belongings on their backs. The traveling conditions were not too bad until they reached the top of the Blue Mountains. Here they found about eight inches of fresh, soft snow. The road was muddy and cut up by freight teams. With the brush alongside the road loaded with wet snow, and with the load on their backs, it was quite tedious traveling. At last they came to the little town of La Grande, Oregon. After spending two and one-half months working at a sawmill here, My father and John decided to try going over the mountains and on into the Wallowa Valley.

Oliver Bishop

Upon arriving on top of what is known as Smith Mountain, overlooking the entire Lower Wallowa Valley, they stopped to take in the sights. They saw it all green and with very little sign of any human beings anywhere, just a few homestead cabins. A small river wound its way through the valley, then entered the gorge known as the Wallowa Canyon. While sitting on their packs and surveying the most wonderful view that lay before them, they noticed a cabin sitting near the center of the Lower Valley and about five miles ahead of them. The thing that really attracted their attention was a thin white ribbon of smoke winding its way heavenward.

Can you imagine the thrill? Someone lives there and is getting ready to prepare dinner. Someone—yes, someone—lives there, and it is right on our way!

The travelers shouldered their belongings and started toward the smoke. After going down the rocky mountainside, they came to a small stream now known as Rock Creek. After crossing it, traveling was a little easier for about one and one-half miles.

Then another small creek was encountered—Dry Creek, so named because it goes almost dry during the dry season, but at that time of the year, in the early spring, it is usually full to the banks. They probably stripped from the waist down and waded it. They crossed and made their way to the cabin with the smoke coming from the chimney.

[The cabin was the home of the Winslow and Harriet Powers family.] They got acquainted and probably had quite a lot to talk about since Harriet Powers had crossed the plains in the same emigrant train as the Bishop family in 1852. The young travelers stayed overnight and, the next morning, after much visiting and conversing about the country, Winslow Powers directed them on up into the Middle Valley and told them where to find two large springs of water coming out at the foot of a hill with nice level land, just right for farming. They followed his advice and found the springs and located their new homes, each with a nice spring on one side and bordering the south fork of the Wallowa River (now known as the Lostine River). The first thing they had to do was file their rights or make application for the ownership of the land. Of course, they wanted lots of land. Then a man could file a Preemption claim on 160 acres, pay a small sum, and get a deed to the land. Then he could file on a homestead for another 160 acres. This they did, thus making 320 acres all in a block, with springs right in the middle of the holdings. Most of the farmland was on the first 160 acres of the Preemption claim, and here they built their first home. They could get along with one cabin, so after spending time in harvest fields near Walla Walla, which gave them money for the first winter, they built a small cabin. With a little grubstake they went to work along the river, cutting poles and making rails to fence their farms. In those days, all crops had to be fenced in, or outside stock, especially Indian horses, would eat the crop.

Winslow and Harriet Powers

Their first permanent neighbor was the pioneer blacksmith, Mr. Jimmie Wilson, located about two miles north and across Whiskey Creek, the north fork of the Wallowa River. Mr. Wilson was about 50 years old, a large, muscular man, and I doubt if a razor ever touched his face, and very seldom did he have a haircut. He was a single man and lived alone in a very small cabin, probably about 12 feet square and just high enough for convenience. It had a mud-and-rock fireplace in one end where he did all his cooking, and it also served as a lighting system of evenings, and over the fireplace was the mantle, just a rough slab, a convenient place for most everything. Most important of all, it was the place where he kept his supply of tobacco. Mr. Wilson was very conservative of the precious weed, and his method was rather unique. He both chewed and smoked, but only bought chewing tobacco. This he chewed very cautiously in large amounts at a time. Then when he got the juice pretty well chewed out of the quid, he found a place on the mantle to dry it. When it was dried sufficiently, it went into his pipe to provide that sweet comfort and happiness which he so much enjoyed. Mr. Wilson was also a stockman and had quite a lot of cattle and some horses, but his blacksmith shop took most of his time, so he had to hire most of his farming done. This gave the young farmers of the area an opportunity. Since work was legal tender to them, if they could get a job with him, they were willing to take stock in exchange.

My father and John were getting along fine with their home-building, working at the poles and rails and cutting logs for a barn. Until one cold winter day with about 10 inches of snow on the ground and temperatures at zero or below, they were walking home in the dark after working hard all day, only to find their new house and all their belongings in ashes. Whether it was caused by a defective chimney or by something being left too close to the fire is anyone's guess. But here they were, out in the snow and cold, and the immediate question was what to do. It was decided to go to Jimmie Wilson's. But there was the river, with ice running and no bridge. The only way to reach the Wilson side was to wade across. It was about two and one-half feet deep. After they waded across the river, it was still about one-half mile to the Wilson cabin. Upon arriving at Mr. Wilson's cabin, they found him just ready to relax after eating his evening meal. He saw they were wet and cold, so as they told their story, he put fresh wood on the fire and started another meal almost immediately.

This hospitable and big-hearted man was just as unique at cooking and housekeeping as he was about other things. Dishes were frying pans and cast iron kettles. The kettles were hung over the fireplace by hooks. In these kettles he did some of his cooking, but most short-order cooking was done in frying pans. His bread was sourdough, baked Johnnycake style in frying pans before the fire, with hot coals underneath. He ate from the frying pans and, when through, would take a piece of Johnnycake, scrub the pan thoroughly with it, hang the pan on a nail, and feed the saturated bread to the dog.

The young farmers got through the winter and built another cabin. When spring came, they bargained with Jimmie Wilson for a yoke of steers to farm with. John Lent was to do the farming while my father worked for Wilson to pay for the steers. When John started plowing, he found he didn't have power enough to handle the breaking plow in the tough sod. They heard that Winslow Powers in the Lower Valley had a few cattle, so they went down to the Powers' home to buy two steers, unbroke, to plow with. The cattle were probably paid for in work. When the new steers were broken, they had four cattle to plow with instead of two, and the farming went on much better.

After a very busy spring and early summer trying to get a little crop started and working to pay for the cattle, it came time for harvest on the outside. My father went to Walla Walla to work in the wheat harvest. He got a job north of Walla Walla on what is known as Eureka Flat, and worked until late in the season. John probably stayed in Wallowa and took care of what little they had and helped Jimmie Wilson with his work. Jimmie Wilson depended on them almost entirely to do his farming.

The next winter, 1879-1880, they were back on their claims, fencing and building—a log barn and two log cabins, one on each place. Each cabin had a rough stone or rock fireplace, put together with mud.

Sometime in early summer of 1880, my father went out to Grand Ronde Valley, got a job working for a farmer by the name of Enlow, and put in most of the summer until late fall doing farm work and riding after stock, as Mr. Enlow had lots of horses. That is where my father probably learned to ride. After that time, he was almost at home on a horse.

After several months he was preparing to head back home when Mr. Enlow made him an offer. The offer was that he would let him take a few mares on shares, each to get one-half of the increase, and my father would have the use of the mares to do his farming. There were probably about 10 or 12 mares. The offer was accepted, and my father went home, riding one horse and driving the balance of the bunch into the Wallowa Valley. From that time on, as long as he was able to handle them, my father had horses. He had one of the ancestors of those Enlow horses almost to the last.

John got some of the Enlow horses, either out of this bunch or another. About this time my father and John seemed to have separate brands, and each had his own equipment and stock, though they still worked together. The coming of the horses meant the going of the oxen. The old ox yokes and bows just lay in a shed. The yokes were hewed from birch timber. They would surely be a relic now.

About 1881, my father began to get more acquainted with the Powers family, helping at harvest time or at any thing when help was needed. In this way he became acquainted with, and fell in love with, Anne Jane Powers. He would go to the Powers' house to see her. Of week days it would be, late in the evening after working all day in the field, and he always seemed to be riding a wild horse.

Anne Jane Powers, my mother, was born near Oakland, Oregon, where the Powers family lived until 1872. Anne's father's health seemed to be failing owing to the dampness of the climate. Since he had been through the upper country and had heard a lot about the Wallowa Valley, they decided to rent their place and to go there. My mother was eleven years old when this trip was made.

When they arrived at the Wallowa River down in the deep canyon, it had to be forded. Just when the wagon got well out into the river bottom, which was covered by large rocks, one of the horses decided that it was just a little too much, so she set back in the harness. They were stuck in mid-stream. Anne's father, being a very composed man, let the team stand a few minutes, then he spoke to them, and they went on across.

They were now ready to climb the steepest and roughest mountainside over which to take a wagon that I have ever seen, and every time I go over to Wallowa I look at that mountainside and wonder again where they could take a wagon up. It was slow, but there were two wagons, so they took one up at a time by using all the horses on each wagon, and the only thing hauled in the wagon was a small cook stove. All the rest of the belongings were packed up by the horses after the wagons were up, thus taking two days to get up the mountain. About two days later, they were going down into the valley, becoming the first white family ever to enter the Wallowa Valley, and right here is where my mother grew to womanhood.

My mother and her brothers and one sister attended the first school ever conducted in the valley. They had to walk about three and one-half miles and cross the Wallowa River on a foot-log. This schooling was short-lived because of the many rumors that the Indians were going on the war path. The parents deemed it unsafe for their children to get so far from home.

In March 1882, Anne Jane Powers became the bride of Oliver N. Bishop at the Powers' home in Lower Valley, and they immediately went to their home in the Middle Valley about three and one-half miles north of Lostine. About this time, Winslow Powers and my father merged their interests in a small band of sheep, and about 1887 they bought the Meadow Ranch, or Bishop Meadows, as it came to be known. The family moved out there to put up the hay and build a fence, and lived in a quick-built shanty that served as kitchen; two tents were used for sleeping quarters.

Anne Bishop

This was always known as the "terrible yellow jacket year." To keep the yellow jackets off the table while eating, a piece of meat was nailed to the foot of a stump just outside the kitchen. There were no screens, not even a swinging door. There was a can of water on the stove. The "jackets" would gather on the meat until it was yellow with them. Then it was somebody's job to throw a dipper of hot water on them. In a few minutes it would be covered again, and the hot water would be applied again. This was repeated over and over. It did not save us from getting lots of stings, but it helped.

They had the sheep out there, and after the hay was up, they built a cabin. We went to the valley for the winter, returned in the spring, and stayed all summer. The camp was about 10 miles north of home. In 1889 my father was doing the herding, and one evening when he got to camp he found that it had caught fire and burned everything but the sourdough jar. He put the sheep in the corral and struck out for home on foot to get another outfit. He loaded up a pack horse and went back to herd sheep.

To be continued in the Winter 2019 newsletter.

Old Chief Joseph's Deadline

During the summer of 1864…a United States survey party of 10 men and assorted pack animals, under surveyor Daniel G. Major, worked its way straight across the northeast corner of Oregon, surveying and marking, by building stone monuments, the line which is now part of the boundary between Oregon and Washington. I feel sure that it must have been soon after this that Chief Old Joseph built his short line of rock monuments in order to make the line between the Wallowa country and the Grande Ronde Valley, which was already being settled by white homesteaders. The monuments were also built across what was, at that time, the only feasible route by which wagons could be taken into the Wallowa.

– Grace Bartlett
"Two State Lines," *From the Wallowa*, 1982

The 1863 treaty was not given much serious consideration by the Indians until June 1872, when A.C. Smith began the herculean task of superintending the building of a road into the new region and bridging the Wallowa River. They saw then that action must be taken at once or their choice lands would be taken by the whites. At the top of Wallowa Hill, the Indians set up a stake covered with hieroglyphics, announcing that this marked the boundary of Joseph's reservation, and that no white man was to carry on work beyond this point. But A.C. Smith, armed with shovel and Winchester, and assisted by an old man named Donley and a half-breed Indian boy, Elle, passed the boundary stake. In the latter part of June the road-builders were stopped by a party of Indians under the leadership of Chief Joseph's nephew, Little Joseph, or Peo Peo Tobet.

On being ordered to stop work, A.C. Smith threw down his shovel and picked up his Winchester. He spoke the Indian jargon of some 200 words fluently, and he told Peo Peo Tobet in a decisive way characteristic of him even now that the land belonged lawfully to the white people, and that he was determined to proceed with the road in order that the settlers might get into the new country. Peo Peo Tobet's handsome face showed violent anger, but after 15 minutes' argument he rode away, saying that he would return in two weeks, and if he found A.C. Smith at work, consequences would be serious. Before the two weeks had expired, A.C. Smith was called to La Grande to speak for the whites in a big council.

– Caroline Wasson-Thomason
The Sunday Oregonian, April 17, 1910

Old Chief Joseph

Tuekakas [Old Joseph], despairing of his efforts to make peace between competing faiths, had indeed torn up his Bible in 1863, and imposed strict rules of traditional worship, language and practice on his people.

Protected by the natural isolation of their valley and the ample unclaimed land that still lay beyond their borders, the Wallowa band of the Nez Perce were now among the last Native peoples within the United States whose lifestyles remained largely unsullied by colonial influence. Tuekakas fiercely protected their independence, marking the boundaries of his homelands by building a line of cairns running over Minam Summit [referred to by settlers as "Old Joseph's Deadline], refusing the offers of free government beef that were clearly intended to undercut the band's hunter-gatherer lifestyle, and destroying the equipment of any speculators or surveyors who wandered in from the increasingly populated Grande Ronde Valley in search of unclaimed grazing land.

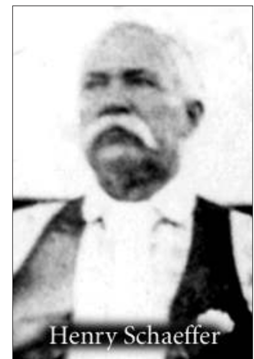
His position was clear: "Inside is the home of my people – the white man may take the land outside. Inside this boundary all our people were born. It circles around the grave of our fathers, and we will never give up these graves for any man."

– Brian Schofield
Selling Your Father's Bones, 2011

Finding Old Chief Joseph's Deadline

The historic deadline, reputed to have been established by Old Chief Joseph, and the spot of which was located and identified on the top of Minam Hill last week by Henry Schaeffer of Wallowa, pioneer of 1872, who, in company with Harley Horner, county historian, and Prof. H.M. Dubois of Joseph, visited the hill for this express purpose, is given authenticity in a famous address delivered by Young Chief Joseph at Washington, D.C. The young chief is quoted as saying:

"In order to have all people understand how much land we owned, my father planted poles around it and said, 'Inside is the home of my people. The white men may take the land outside. Inside this boundary all our people were born. It circles around the graves of our fathers, and we will never give up these graves to any man.'"


Henry Schaeffer

It is thought, as near as the records can be localized, that the boundary pole on Minam Hill was one of the encircling number referred to by the young chief, and was planted [probably in 1863 or 1864] some years after the treaty council held with Governor Stevens near Walla Walla in 1855, at which time the old chief flatly refused to give up the Wallowa country to the white people.

In 1863 a second treaty council was held and was attended by the young chief delegated by his father to represent the tribe. Again a flat refusal was given to the demand to yield the Wallowa country. Then Chief Lawyer of the Upper Nez Perce sold out the Lower Nez Perce, as the Wallowa Indians were known. The act of Chief Lawyer, however was declared by Chief Joseph to be null and void, as he had no authority to act for any other tribe than his own.

Possibly one of Old Chief Joseph's boundary markers

"If we ever owned the land, we own it still. We never sold it," the young chief once dramatically exclaimed.

Few of the old settlers can recollect the pole as it stood on Minam Hill. Mr. Schaeffer, however, vividly recalls it. The site is on the old road about 26 yards from the line fence of the old road and 40 yards from the first clump of trees passed by on the old road. Mr. Schaeffer, when taken to the top of the hill, identified the spot readily and without hesitation. Nearby was a worn trail, supposedly an Indian trail.

– *The Wallowa Sun*, September 1, 1927

Wallowa History Center

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Wallowa Outdoor Report

Prospects for Deer Hunting Are Excellent

Prospects for deer hunting in the Wallowa Mountains are better than usual and promise to reward the Nimrods liberally this fall, according to a survey of the "mowich" [Chinook jargon for "deer"] population recently completed by the Forest Service. At no previous time in the history of the local forest office have deer been more plentiful, and the sprinkling of deer with horns is well distributed over the forest, says N.J. Billings, local Forest Supervisor.

The prospects for bird shooting are poor. Some three or four years ago some malady made great inroads on upland bird population, and the past year has seen practically no gain for these birds.

Fishing remains the major attraction to take the tourist and camper into the hills, and some excellent catches are reported from the higher mountain lakes and streams. The Imnaha remains a good fishing stream, especially in the lower box canyon and in the higher mountains. As usual, the good fishing is along the streams and in the lakes which are less accessible. John Henry Lake and North Minam River, requiring a hike of from 6 to 14 miles, are good for a limit catch almost any day. Steamboat Lake is usually good very early in the morning and late in the evening, but frequently does not reward the midday fisherman. And the Wallowa River continues to reward the patient and diligent fisherman the same as usual.

– *The Wallowa Sun*, July 24, 1930