

WALLOWA QUARTERLY

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A Life Cut Short

Fred Riggle (1905-1932)

Adapted from the forthcoming book, *Wallowa: A Century of Its History, 1840-1940*

Photographs courtesy of Ronee Stone, granddaughter of Abbie Riggle

Fred Riggle was a young man with a bright future but a deadly disease, and when these two things collided in the early-1930s, Wallowa lost “a valued friend” and an “exemplary citizen” whose life was cut short from the promise it once seemed to hold. Born and raised on Smith Mountain, Fred made his way to Wallowa in 1921, when he arrived to enter high school at the age of 16, a year after the death of his father. Before he was through, Fred had become an honor student, a member of the debate team, and a part-time employee of the Brownlee Service Station, which was located near the intersection of the La Grande-Joseph Highway (today’s Fifth Street) and Clairmont Street. Eventually, he came to own this service station, which made him probably the youngest business owner in town.



Fred Riggle

Honor Student

An honor student is one who has passed with an average of not less than 90 percent in each subject for the entire semester. These students are not required to take any of the final examinations, and are exempt from these examinations in recognition of the excellent quality of work done. The honor students [include] Fred Riggle. (*The Wallowa Sun*, May 18, 1922)

Debate Team

The tryout for the debate team to represent Wallowa High School in the interscholastic debaters was held at a general assembly in the high school building Monday afternoon. A total of nine pupils entered in the tryout, which brought out a number of budding orators. All the speeches were good, and the judges had considerable difficulty in finally picking the four winners. The speakers [included] Fred Riggle. (*The Wallowa Sun*, January 25, 1924)

Auto Shop

Fred Riggle returned from Portland Sunday after taking a course in auto school there. After visiting his mother on Smith Mountain, he will open a battery and electrical shop in connection with the Brownlee filling station. (*The Wallowa Sun*, August 21, 1925)

Family Visit

Fred Riggle spent Sunday night with his mother and brothers on the mountain. He was very much surprised to see how well the crops are looking, and also his mother’s flowers, not to have any water. The gardens as well as the flowers begin to show their great need of a good rain. (*The Wallowa Sun*, July 1, 1926)

Lucky Day

Thursday of last week proved to be a lucky day for Fred Riggle of Wallowa, who left Tuesday for his home on Smith Mountain on a two-day hunting trip. Wednesday came and went with no success. The next morning he again

shouldered his gun, and as he passed his mother in the yard humorously remarked, "I'm going to bring in a deer this time, for I'm not coming back until I bag something, if it's no more than a chipmunk." By 10 o'clock he had bagged a bobcat, and as Smith Mountain is not a native haunt for these animals, this one must have been changing his place of residence and, of course, ran into trouble on the way.

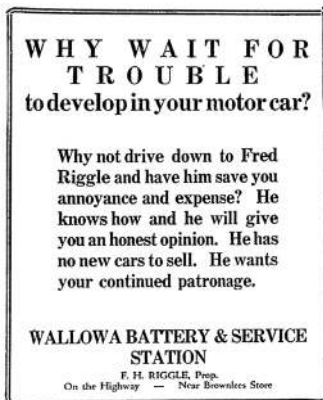
One hour later, he chased a fine four-point buck out of the brush and killed it with the second shot while running. It fell in very rough country, and after dressing it Fred decided it would weigh 200 pounds, but after packing it out of a canyon equal to the Grande Ronde near Troy to the top where the prize could be reached by car, he said he imagined that the buck weighed at least 1,000 pounds.

After reaching the top and making a cache of it, he went home for the car and in company with his brothers, Donald and John, they soon reached the spot and were back home in good time. Donald, who is a veteran at wielding a knife when there are deer around, decided it would weigh 170 dressed. The scales proved that he was close when they balanced at 160.

At a late hour the same evening, Fred left for Wallowa, having decided his rifle and all remaining bucks might rest in peace for another year. (*The Wallowa Sun*, October 14, 1926)

Buys Out Partner

Fred Riggle, battery and electrical expert associated with F.H. Brownlee in the Wallowa Battery and Service Station for the last year and a half, this week purchased the interests of Mr. Brownlee and henceforth will conduct the business under his own proprietorship.



Failing health of Mr. Brownlee necessitated his retirement from active business. He expects to go over to western Oregon to look around and spend some time with the hope that the change will be beneficial to his health.

The Wallowa Battery and Service Station was originally opened as the Brownlee Service Station by Mr. Brownlee in 1922 on a site adjoining the Standard Oil Company's local station and fronting the highway. Upon the return to Wallowa of Mr. Riggle, who had taken a course in battery and electrical work in Portland, the name of the station was changed to the Wallowa Battery and Service Station, and Mr. Riggle became a joint owner, handling the battery and electrical work in which he was an expert.

Fred is a young man and well- and favorably-known in Wallowa and Wallowa County, the major part of his life having been spent on Smith Mountain, where his mother and brothers reside and operate a farm. He was educated in and graduated

from the Wallowa schools and continued his studies in Portland, taking up a specialized course in automobiles, with the major emphasis on the battery and electrical work. (*The Wallowa Sun*, July 28, 1927)

Gift Subscription

"Subscribe for your own Wallowa Sun. Don't borrow your neighbor's," remarked Fred Riggle to his mother as he handed her his renewal for another year's subscription to The Sun. (*The Wallowa Sun*, November 24, 1927)

Mud Hole

Fred Riggle left Wallowa Saturday evening for Smith Mountain with the intention of taking supper with his folks, but was detained over three hours in a mud hole near the Gregory home, where he probably would have had to spend the night, but J.F. Gregory, his son Harley, and Foster Wise came to his rescue. He reached his destination near the midnight hour and found his folks sleeping peacefully. They knew nothing about his predicament until the next morning. Fred said he would wait a while before he tried out the mud holes again. He returned to Wallowa Sunday evening. (*The Wallowa Sun*, April 25, 1929)

Leaves Hospital

The condition of Fred Riggle's health has improved to the extent he was able to leave the hospital Thursday. Fred says he feels fine and gained five pounds during his twelve days' stay at the hospital. (*The Wallowa Sun*, February 4, 1932)

Enters Hospital

Fred Riggle is a patient in the hospital this week. (*The Wallowa Sun*, February 11, 1932)

Funeral Services

Prominent Young Man Dies Sunday

Fred H. Riggle passed away at the local hospital early Sunday morning, February 21, 1932. Funeral services were conducted Monday at the Christian Church, of which he was a member. The large concourse of friends present and the beautiful flowers at the service testified to the esteem in which he was held in the community.

Fred Hiram Riggle was born at Smith Mountain, Oregon, on January 26, 1905, and died at Wallowa, Oregon February 21, 1932, at the age of 27 years and 26 days. His boyhood was spent on Smith Mountain at the home of his parents, Mr. and Mrs. John Riggle, and here he obtained his early schooling.

In 1921 Fred came to Wallowa and entered the high school, working during his spare time at the Brownlee Service Station. He graduated from high school in 1924 and then entered the Oregon Institute of Technology at Portland, enrolling in the course of Automobile Mechanics, from which he graduated in August 1925.

Returning to Wallowa, he bought the Brownlee Service Station, known now as the Wallowa Battery and Service Station. In his place of business he has serviced the public in a creditable manner, maintaining a first-class service station and repair shop until the time of his recent illness.

A few years ago his health began to fail. His physician advised a change of occupation, but he hoped to overcome the disease, which was preying on his system.

In the passing of this young man, the community feels that it has lost a valued friend and citizen. (*The Wallowa Sun*, February 25, 1932)

Fred H. Riggle

Fred was born on Smith Mountain and spent his boyhood days and got his early schooling there. His father died in 1920, and in 1921 Fred came to Wallowa to enter high school. He worked during his spare time at the service station [Brownlee's] to pay his expenses. He graduated in 1924 and entered Oregon Institute of Technology in Portland, taking the automobile mechanics course and graduating in 1925. Fred then returned to Wallowa, where he purchased the service station, which eventually became his Wallowa Battery and Service Station, which he operated successfully until his death.

He was told that he had Bright's disease, and the doctors tried to get him to change his occupation, but mechanics was his thing. He hoped to overcome the disease. He never told the family, and nearest friends didn't know the seriousness of his illness.

Fred was a hard worker and faithful to his obligations. He was held in the highest esteem by patrons and business associates. The community lost a valuable friend and exemplary citizen. (Excerpt from "Fred H. Riggle," *Wallowa County History: A Continuation*, 2018)

Brother Takes Over

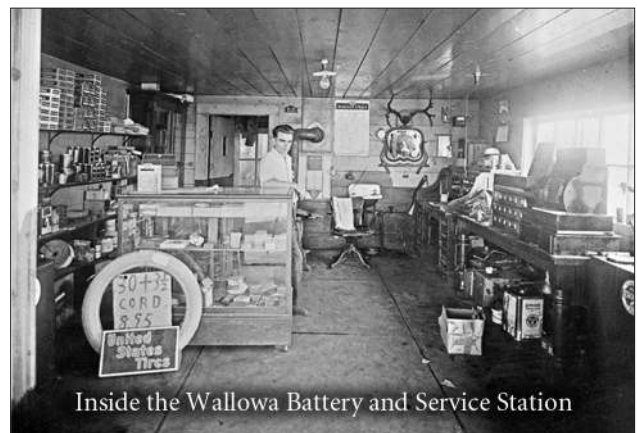
Donald Riggle has taken charge of the service station formerly operated by his brother, Fred Riggle. Donald plans to stay until spring and will be assisted in this work by Ray Smith. (*The Wallowa Sun*, February 25, 1932)

Mother Writes

March 6, 1932

Editor, *The Sun*

A number of Wallowa friends requested I should write them as to how I made it home, and instead of writing to each one, I decided to write you to make an item for *The Sun* that they, through it, might hear.



Inside the Wallowa Battery and Service Station



My household goods were taken by truck to the Skillings place on Friday and there housed. My son-in-law and daughter, Mr. and Mrs. George Wise, also my son with his pack horse, were there to assist me up the hill. Johnnie, my son, packed a box on each side of his horse with all the bedding on top of them. The four of us carried all we were able and started up the trail.

We made it fine, and when we got to the top of the hill, we put everything in the sled, which George, my son-in-law, had brought that far. I assure you the little pony gave a sigh of relief when it was relieved of its heavy load.

It was snowing and blowing on top, and there wasn't a sign of a road. The horses fell down every little way, and when we were about halfway to my home the team gave out, and one horse refused to get up.

George unhitched it, and both he and John tried every means to get it up but did not succeed. They decided to let it rest a while, and after doing so it got up but was trembling all over, so

George took the team and left the sled with my goods, and John and I started out on foot.

It was very cold, and I shivered until I could hardly talk. Had on only slippers with low rubbers, and the snow was four-and-a-half feet deep with 16 inches of loose snow on top of that. John went ahead, carrying the things we needed, and broke out a trail, I following behind.

The next morning, George, John, and Leonard brought the sled on in after first going over the road themselves and driving the team.

It is three days since our awful trip, but I so far feel no ill effects of it. I am so nervous yet from the awful shock of the death of my son I can hardly write.

Sincerely,

Abbie Riggle (*The Wallowa Sun*, March 10, 1932)

Fred Riggle stands in front of his Wallowa Battery and Service Station located on the highway (Fifth Street) in Wallowa in the mid-1920s. To his right and in the background is the Standard Oil Company's substation, built in 1923. To his left is a posting of his station's gas prices: "standard" (today's regular) at 19 cents per gallon plus a 4 cents



"state tax," and "ethyl" (today's premium) at 22 cents per gallon plus the same 4 cents state tax.

Both the service station and the battery businesses were relatively new at the time, with the nation's first service station opening in 1905 in St. Louis, and the West's first in 1907 in Seattle.

In the 1920s, Wallowa had at least one other service station: the Allen Station, established in 1925. It was also on the highway (on the Storie Street section of it), across the street from the Masonic Lodge (today's Community Bank) and next to the Knights of Pythias Hall (now an apartment building), approximately where today's Leisure Way apartments stand.

As far as batteries are concerned, early automobiles didn't have them. Instead, they were started with hand-cranks, which could break arms, dislocate shoulders, even crack skulls. But after the first electric starter appeared in the 1912 Cadillac, it didn't take long for it to catch on, and by 1920 almost all new cars had electric starters. This meant that these cars also needed a supply of electrical power. That's where the first auto batteries—and the first battery specialists, such as Fred Riggle—came in.

* * *

Life on Smith Mountain

By Don Riggle

From *35 Years on Smith Mountain* (1983)

I have been asked many times, “Where is Smith Mountain? What kind of place is it?” Smith Mountain is 13 miles northwest of Wallowa. It is an area bounded on the south and west by the Wallowa River, on the north by Howard Creek, and on the east by Rock Creek, a mountaintop consisting of roughly 30 sections of land, or 20,000 acres. Access is by a country road leaving Highway 82 at the head of Wallowa Canyon.

Trees

When my folks came [to Smith Mountain], Granddad was in the process of clearing several acres of land. Timber was of no value, so he just took his axe, went out, and girdled a couple hundred-thousand feet of good yellow [ponderosa] pine, up to four feet in diameter. Girdling is cutting a notch clear around the tree to stop the sap flow. They soon die and can be burned. They would burn them down, then cut them in lengths a team could handle, turn them around together, and burn them up. If you had the money, land that had up to a hundred-thousand feet per acre you could get cleared for \$40 per acre.

Winter

Winters were hard and generally we would have from five to seven feet of snow. It was impossible to keep roads broken out and open all winter. Everybody went to town no later than October and bought enough of everything to run until May or June the next year. They would pay for what they got the year before, and then charge another year’s supply. Some of the prices I remember: coffee, 15 cents per pound; crackers, 20 pounds for 95 cents; flour, \$2 per barrel (four 50-pound sacks); good overalls were 85 cents a pair; a good everyday shoe, \$2.50; kerosene, 15 cents a gallon; sugar, 5 cents per pound, in 100-pound sacks.

Transportation

In those early days, before the railroad came into the country, the stock were all driven out in droves. As many as 800 hogs went out at one time, when the end of the railroad was at Elgin. Freight was all carried by four-, six-, or eight-horse teams. Passengers rode through the canyon in swaying stagecoaches drawn by four-horse teams, piloted by expert drivers.

Water

Water was very scarce. There was only one spring with a road to it of any size. That’s where most everybody hauled from. We hauled in four 50-gallon whiskey barrels and several 5-gallon cans. Many of the early settlers carried water on horseback from here, and most of the stock on the range came here for water. The spring ran about three gallons a minute, and the trough held 150 gallons.

Washing

Mother was a good housekeeper, an excellent cook, and a hard worker. I never heard her complain no matter how tough it looked. About twice a week, she gathered up the dirty clothes, along with my sister and me, and walked down into a canyon on just a deer trail to this spring that had enough water to wash the clothes. She would heat water in a boiler made out of a 5-gallon kerosene can, and walk back near half a mile. That just about laid her out. We did this for several summers, also carried our drinking water from the same spring.

Money

There was no money and times were hard. If you worked, you took pay in produce of some kind. Of course, it didn’t take much money. Taxes on 160 acres was about \$7 per year. But you were on your own, everyone realized that. You couldn’t go to the county for any help. And no government handouts. If you got down and out, you went to a neighbor. Most everybody made their own butter and lard and soap, and cured their own meat. My mother made her own butter in a two-pound mold and sold it for years, two pounds for 25 cents. Eggs, 15 cents a dozen. We generally killed from three to eight hogs and one or two fat steers.

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1880

First Wallowa Sawmill

I think it was in 1880 when the Henry K. Chamberlain family decided to leave the desert country of Nevada for a more invigorating climate, with more fuel and better water. These characteristics they found in Wallowa Valley, then containing but few settlers. Securing homesteads near the head of Diamond Prairie, log dwellings were erected, and as there were over a dozen children in the families, a school district was formed and a schoolhouse built. Commandeering the waters of Bear Creek for power, Mr. Chamberlain put in a sawmill, the first in that section.

– H.W. Oliver

Reminiscences of Wallowa County, 1936

1885

Socks

About the year 1885, merchants installed hosiery and sold socks at a price that home knitters could not compete with. Up to this time, no overshoes were to be had. The best comfort for men's feet while out in zero weather were thick, homemade wool socks in leather or gum boots. After the introduction of overshoes, men could wear the thinner and inferior factory-made socks with felt-lined overshoes over their boots and keep their feet more comfortable than they had before.

– James W. Powers

Frontier Days of Oregon and the Life of Winslow Phelps Powers, 1941