

WALLOWA QUARTERLY

Newsletter of the Wallowa History Center
Preserving Our Past for the Future

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Wallowa's Redfish

"Because of the Wallowa Lake dam, the kokanee stay in the six-mile, 302-foot deep lake their entire life." – The Observer, September 27, 2013

Whether you call them kokanees, bluebacks, or yanks, they're all the same fish—sockeye salmon whose migratory path to the Pacific Ocean has been blocked through the years by dams that have trapped them in Wallowa Lake. Before the dams, however, their numbers were legendary, and the annual catch was measured in tons. Even though the Wallowa region was also home to multitudes of other fish species, it was the "redfish" that caught the imagination and the wonder of early settlers.

Redfish

By Grace Bartlett (1911-1999)

From *The Wallowa Country, 1867-1977* (1984)

"The theory is that yanks are land-locked redfish [sockeye salmon] and that if they are permitted to go to sea, they will return as large redfish." – The Wallowa Sun, March 12, 1926

These fish, which were a staple of the Nez Perce diet, fresh and dried, because they were so plentiful and easy to catch in the Wallowa Valley in the late summer, were sockeye salmon. The sockeye or blueback salmon is an interesting fish in that they will run only to cold inland lakes which have snow-water inlets still running into them as late as July and August.

Before they were interfered with by the white man and his dams, especially the dam at the foot of Wallowa Lake, they ran from the sea up the Columbia, into the Snake River. Those coming to the Wallowa entered the Grande Ronde River, then into the Wallowa River, and thence to Wallowa Lake.

The sockeye salmon which has become land-locked, as those in Wallowa Lake did when the dam was built, do not grow to the same large size as the sea-going salmon. In Wallowa Lake they were called "yanks" by the early settlers because of the nibbling manner in which they took the hook, necessitating a quick jerk or yank to pull them out of the water.

Redfish Migration

By Don Riggle (1902-1983)

From *35 Years on Smith Mountain* (1983)

"The fall run of salmon is fully equal to that of other years Hundreds are caught every day. John Weaver and Frank Millard, who are working on Ott's brewery, killed 10 in one forenoon. The banks of all the creeks are strewn with salmon carcasses." – Wallowa County Chieftain, November 26, 1897

When we first began going to Wallowa for supplies with team and wagon, there was no bridge across the Wallowa River. Instead, at the confluence of Bear Creek and the Wallowa River there was a ford. My father said many times when crossing he had seen the redfish on their upstream migration to Wallowa Lake to spawn, so thick you could hardly see the bottom.

Redfish at Wallowa Lake

By John H. Horner (1870-1953)

From the *J.H. Horner Papers* (1889-1985)

“The redfish run began in early June and lasted until late July. One could stand on a bridge and new schools of these fish would darken the whole stream and take several minutes to pass.” – Loren T. Powers, Pioneer Memories, undated

Pete O. Flanner said he put the first boat ever put on Wallowa Lake by a white man, which was a rowboat, saying he whipsawed the lumber and made the boat in 1872 or 1873. R.M. Downey said he put the second boat on the lake in 1876. He and Et Roupe and John McCall, called “One-legged McCall,” whipsawed the lumber for it and made it and put it on the running gears of his wagon, hauled it around to the foot of the lake and backed down into the lake till it floated off. And McCall paddled it off.

One-legged McCall was named so for having lost one leg below the knee and made a peg leg. He built the first cabin ever built at the foot of Wallowa Lake where he made kits to pack fish in and to sell. He took John Thompson, a one-armed man who was a trapper and hunter, in with him, and they were the first white men to pack redfish to sell.

The *Mountain Sentinel* of La Grande, Oregon, of Saturday, September 2, 1876, says, “We hear that Indians of Wallowa Valley, went to the fishery of John McCall and ordered him to leave, and on his refusal, they assaulted him with a club, knocking him down and destroyed his fishery and told him they would not allow him to fish any more in Wallowa Lake.”

The reason the Indians objected so strenuously to whites camping and fishing at the head of the lake was it was the main spawning ground of the redfish, as the head of the lake was known as the Indian fishing grounds by the earliest white settlers, and each year more whites come to the lake to fish when the redfish come up and pack and dry what they needed for the winter.

These fish came to the head of the lake by the millions, and they were so thick that the water was a solid wiggling mass, and one could go there in a boat with a pitchfork, stand in the boat and fill it in a very short time.

Sam Wade said he had always noticed when at the junction of the Wallowa and Minam rivers when the redfish were running that they kept close to the east bank of the Wallowa River, and none went up the Minam River, and the fish were so thick moving up that they was a solid moving mass and that he had helped John McCall pull his seine in at the head of the lake and they counted 400 fish at one haul. The redfish were usually running in at the foot of the lake by middle of July.

In the “Enterprise Items” of the *Aurora* newspaper of July 1894, it says, “The famous redfish are making their appearance in large numbers in the river by town. Old pioneers say it resembles 20 years ago, when they were so thick it was almost impossible to ford the river with a wagon.”

The *Weekly Standard* of Portland, Oregon, Friday, September 8, 1876, says, “Indians will not let white men fish on the Wallowa Lake as John McCall will testify when he gets over his beating and is able to talk.”

The Fisherman’s Paradise

From *Oregon State Journal* (June 28, 1879)

“The redfish are still arriving at the lake in small schools. One reason that the run is not large is because there are so many traps in the river below them.” – Wallowa County Chieftain, July 23, 1885

The Wallowa Lake is undoubtedly the fisherman’s paradise. Several varieties of trout and salmon are caught in its waters, following each other in successive seasons, and in the month of August the lake is literally filled with the Wallowa redfish, a species which are found in no other locality in America or in the known world.

It has been a matter of great study to ascertain the habits of this fish, which comes to the lake regularly in the spawning season; sufficient has been learned, however, to demonstrate that they are a species of the salmon and that they come up from the ocean through the Columbia, Snake, Grande Ronde and Wallowa rivers to their birthplace in the crystal waters of the Wallowa Lake, and that after reaching their spawning grounds they undergo a radical change in color and shape.

In August they run up into the small branches near the head of the lake where the water is shallow, and are then caught in great numbers with pitchforks, sharpened sticks, hooks, and even by some enthusiastic novices jumping

into the shallow water and catching them in their hands. These fish average twenty inches in length and vary in weight from four to eight pounds, and will average fully five pounds each.

A violent storm had been raging on the lake for several days and the kingfisher, McCall, allowed that there would be no use of trying to catch any fish, but we had brought with us our favorite trolling tackle, with which we had caught the largest fishes in the Eastern lakes, so notwithstanding the wind and rain and rolling whitecaps, we tried the lake and soon had a mess of speckled trout averaging three pounds each.

The chilly air soon drove us to McCall's cabin, where that worthy soon invited our attention to a trout supper such as would have tickled the palate of the veriest gourmand among the patrons of Delmonico.

Sockeye Salmon

By the U.S. Department of Commerce, Northwest Fisheries Science Center

Adapted from "Life History of *Oncorhynchus nerka*"

"I saw a lady from the county fishing for large reddsides steelhead in the Wallowa River near the town of Wallowa. She was standing in the river with a pitchfork. When a school of reddsides came by, she would spear one of them with the pitchfork and toss it on the bank. At one point, so many reddsides swam by at the same time that they knocked her down into the water." – William O. Douglas, U.S. Supreme Court Justice

Wallowa Lake, near the head of the Wallowa River in northeastern Oregon, once supported a substantial sockeye salmon population. Grace Bartlett indicated that following the forced removal of members of the Nez Perce tribe in 1877 and elimination of their ceremonial and subsistence fishery based on sockeye salmon from the Wallowa Valley, seining by horse and rowboat at the head of Wallowa Lake became a small industry that produced an annual catch of about 60,000 pounds of sockeye salmon by 1881.

A rough dam to supply water to a small shingle mill was built across the lake outlet in 1884, and a more substantial dam and irrigation ditch were constructed in 1890 indicated that this latter dam blocked the migration corridor for the Wallowa Lake population and resulted in landlocked sockeye salmon, locally termed "yanks," that spawned in tributary creeks in the fall.

Barton W. Evermann and Seth E. Meek reported in 1898 that both "large and small redfish" occurred in Wallowa Lake and spawned together. The small redfish or "yanks" or "grayling" were likely residual sockeye salmon, as they were overwhelmingly males and more silvery in color than larger fish.

Several authors have reported that prior to increasing the height of the dam at Wallowa Lake in 1916, sockeye salmon continued to return and spawn above the lake. The last reported sockeye salmon were apparently observed in Wallowa Lake in 1916 or 1917. However, Steven P. Cramer in 1990 stated that "sockeye were extinct from the lake by 1904."

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife reported that sockeye salmon were observed until the early 1930s in the Wallowa River below the lake, while others reported that construction of a 12-meter high concrete dam at the lake outlet in 1929 finished off the population.

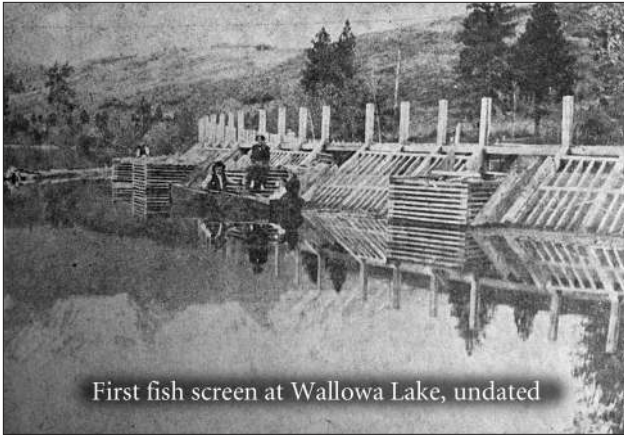
In 1990, Steven P. Cramer stated that a 4-meter tall dam that existed between 1906 and 1924 at the Wallowa River Hatchery, 43 miles below Wallowa Lake [near Minam], completely blocked upstream fish passage. Considerable numbers of non-native sockeye salmon were stocked in the Wallowa River below Wallowa Lake in the 1920s and 1930s, perhaps contributing to reports of sockeye salmon returning to the Wallowa River up until the early 1930s.

Blueback Salmon

From *The Wallowa Sun* (June 17, 1920)

"The annual run of redfish is reported in the river; several have already been caught between Wallowa and Lostine. The state planted fry in the lake at Joseph three years ago, and they are now returning to spawn. It is hoped that the State Fish Commission will continue the planting of fry each year until the streams of Wallowa County are well-restocked with these fish. They are one of the finest table fish caught in these mountain waters." – The Wallowa Sun, July 29, 1920

The blueback salmon fry that were placed in Wallowa Lake last summer have been turned loose in the main river and are heading toward the sea. That is, the ones that do not get into irrigating ditches. Thousands of them have and are perishing on account of drifting down the ditches instead of the main river. They were liberated about 10 days



First fish screen at Wallowa Lake, undated

ago, and the first of the week were plentiful here at Wallowa. They average about seven inches in length, and many have been picked up on the fields around Wallowa.

If the State Fish Department expects to successfully propagate salmon of this or another variety, it will be up to them to build holding ponds in this end of the valley so that when the small salmon are liberated, they will be below the intakes of the irrigating ditches from the river.

Last week's *[Enterprise] Record Chieftain* said in part:

"As a result of the experiment of last year, the State Fish Commission probably will plant no more blueback salmon in Wallowa Lake. The large irrigation ditches are too much

for the fish, many thousands of which have been carried out into the fields to die during the last week.

"Fish that left the lake last week, starting on their way to the sea, found the large ditches just below the outlet wide open. Screens have been tried several times, but it seems impossible to get a device which will work in such streams.

"The young salmon average about seven inches in length and hug the bank of the river on their way downstream. Thus a large part of them turn off into ditches, and they never head back as trout do when they encounter danger. They keep on going with the current, no matter where it carries them."

* * *

Building Improvements

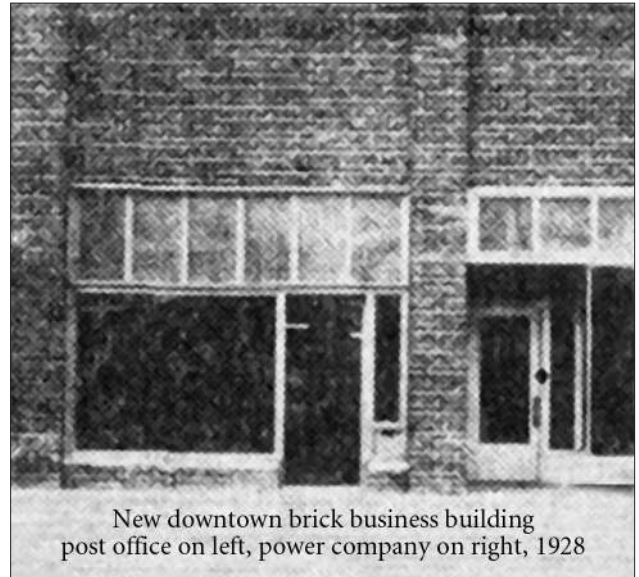
From *The Wallowa Sun* (July 19, 1928)

The steady progress in building improvements that has marked the advancement of Wallowa within recent years has been maintained this summer and is reflected in the erection of a new post office building, new garage, and a sightly tourist park. For comparative purposes, it is interesting to compare the old with the new.

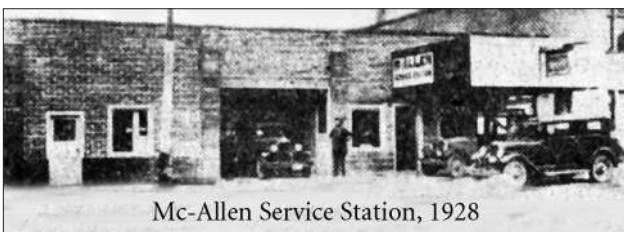
Post Office

For years, Wallowa was served with post office facilities in an old frame, one-story structure. Then J.P. Gillespie, one of Wallowa's progressive businessmen, obtained the building and site and at once made plans for improvement.

This spring he has had the old building moved back where it served as temporary quarters during the erection of a new concrete and brick home. The building is 30 by 70 feet, and while known as the post office block, is divided into two rooms, one occupied by the post office and the other to be the home of the local office of the Pacific Power and Light Company.



New downtown brick business building
post office on left, power company on right, 1928



Mc-Allen Service Station, 1928

Service Station

A second interesting comparisons is between the old frame house that formerly was the Allen Service Station and the new concrete and cement-tile building that has replaced it, to be known as the Mc-Allen Service Station.

As local distributors for the Chevrolets and contingent service, the business demanded more adequate quarters. In providing them, the old frame house was torn out and a modern garage building 60 by 80 feet put up. This is divided into storage and shop space, display and stock rooms, and ladies' restroom facilities.

A large canopy, electric-lighted, leads out from the main entrance to shelter the two gas pumps and oil tanks. The building fronts on Storie Street and adjoins the two-story Knights of Pythias Hall on the south. C.W. Allen and C.A. McClaran are the owners of this garage and have as their shop man and mechanic Jack Jewell.



Store at Brownlee's Tourist Park, 1928

Tourist Park

The third major improvement of the summer is the establishment of a tourist park and store by F.H. Brownlee at the edge of the southeast part of town. Five cabins, each with a garage, were erected at the south end of a projected quadrangle, with a cement shower-house on the west and conveniently adjoining. There are showers for men and women and facilities for tourists doing small washing.



Cabins (left) and shower house (right) at Brownlee's Tourist Park, 1928

Each cabin has two rooms containing table, benches, bed and mattress, and stove. Garbage disposal is by means of a brick incinerator on the north side of the grounds. A building containing private stalls for cars for those who do not desire cabins is also provided.

A landscaping scheme has been worked out which will eventually see the park converted in to a grassy, tree-shaded lawn, with a wading pool for children. A driveway leads in from the state highway [Fifth Street]. Around the park is a woven-wire fence. The highway passes between the grounds and the park store, where Mr. Brownlee has his office. "I've had this park in mind ever since the highway came through," said Mr. Brownlee. "Results already have justified the improvement."

Notes

As of today, June 2019, the post office half of the downtown brick building is occupied by Ron's Place, the power company side by part of the Horseshoe Bar & Grill.

The Mc-Allen Service Station once stood on the site of what is now the Leisure Way Apartments . Next to it, the Knights of Pythias Hall building, on the corner of Second and Fifth streets, has been converted to apartments.

Brownlee's Tourist Park is gone, though its concrete shower house still stands at the corner of Fifth Street and the Truck Route.

* * *

City Improvements

From *The Wallowa Sun* (September 18, 1908)

The sidewalk on Pine Street has been begun, but work is delayed on account of a shortage of nails. The grading of the street has been completed and adds greatly to the appearance of the street. The work was done by subscription.

The Wallowa Mercantile Company has completed its sidewalk on Storie Street past the warehouse, and Marshal Hug has completed crosswalks on Storie Street. Other improvements are being planned.

The Wallowa Drugstore is making several improvements. Mr. Galloway as manager is showing a progressive spirit. The front of the store was painted and much of the shelving changed.

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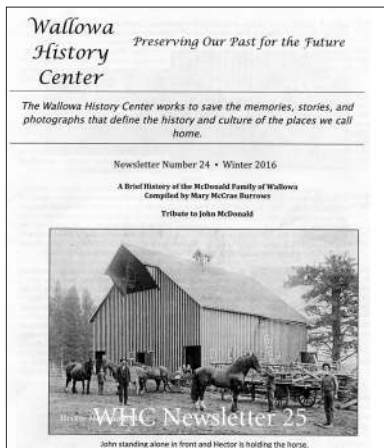
Newsletter Corrections

Several minor errors that have occurred in our newsletter through the years have recently come to our attention, so we are taking this opportunity to make the necessary corrections.

January 2007 The photograph labeled “Sawmill at Minam” is actually the J. Herbert Bate sawmill at Looking Glass, built in the 1950s and dismantled in the 1960s by the Boise Cascade Corporation, then the new owner of the Bate properties.

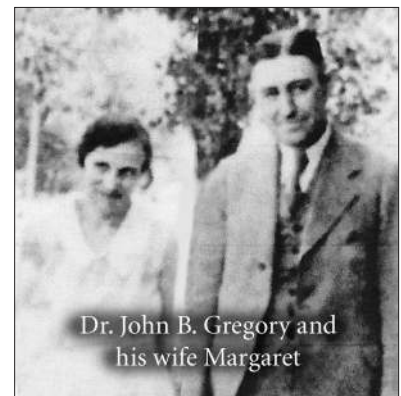


Sawmill at Looking Glass



Winter 2016 The newsletter is mislabeled “Number 24” when it is actually Number 25. (Number 24 is the Summer 2015 newsletter.) The numbering since then has been corrected and made accurate.

Winter 2019 The photograph of Dr. John B. Gregory has an error in the caption. Standing next to Dr. Gregory is *not* his wife Margaret Gregory, but Anna Frick, who, along with her husband Ottmar (“Otto”), operated the City Bakery in Wallowa.



Dr. John B. Gregory and his wife Margaret