

WALLOWA QUARTERLY

Newsletter of the Wallowa History Center

Preserving Our Past for the Future

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IN THIS ISSUE

Lost Prairie • Wallowa City • One Building's History • Lt. Forse & Chief Joseph • Road Maintenance

Lost Prairie's History, 1883–1888

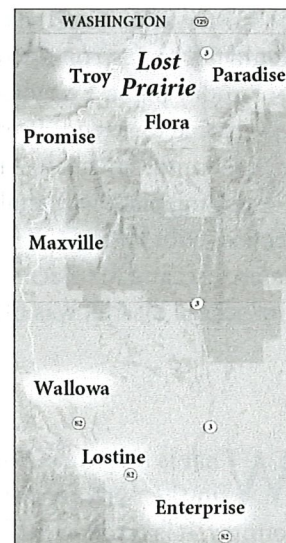
By James Edward Renfrow (1863-1936)

Adapted from the *Wallowa County Chieftain* (November, 4, 1937)

Wallowa is more than just Wallowa, more than the town and the streets and the neighboring farms that nudge up near the city limits. It also includes far-flung settlements whose beginnings were irrevocably linked to Wallowa—Smith Mountain and Grossman, Maxville and Promise, Powwatka and Leap, as well as other communities, especially to the north, that once depended, at least in part, on Wallowa for the town's shops and trades, its markets and services. Even though most of these communities are gone now, the memories they held have been folded into the fabric of Wallowa's own history. Lost Prairie is among these.

Lost Prairie was first permanently settled in November 1883 by George Allen and son James, who moved there from the Grande Ronde Valley. About the first of January 1884, Lasarus Wright and James Alford and wife and two small children started from Lower Cove, Grand Ronde Valley, in a sled, determined to reach the Lost Prairie country. Arriving in Wallowa Valley, they found there had been a heavy fall of snow, about two feet on the level, and decided to leave Mrs. Alford and children with acquaintances of theirs on Wallowa River, and the men pressed on to see if it was possible to get through. They had two mules and three horses, one being a saddle horse.

When they reached Mud Prairie, their team was about exhausted floundering through the snow, which at this place was five feet deep. There they stopped at a cabin that was under construction by Jack Gregg and myself, I with the intention of locating a homestead. They decided to help finish the cabin and bring Mrs. Alford and children that far and leave them until a road could be broken through the snow toward Lost Prairie. Then Las Wright, Jack Gregg, and myself on long snowshoes made the trip to see if the snow continued as deep or if shallower. We were out a part of two days and two nights, with scarcely a blaze on trees to make our course, arriving at Mr. Allen's cabin about 5 p.m. on



Red Fir Hotel

January 9, 1884. Mr. Wright had been in the previous summer and had laid a foundation on a claim, and on January 10 I staked out a claim, it being part of my first farm. At this time there was no snow in the canyons, new grass eight inches high, and no snow on the Prairie except on north slopes. The party helped him kill and pack three deer, then returned to report unfavorably about the trip. At Red Fir that spring, the snow was about two feet deep and continued about the same to the Lost Prairie hill.

Some settlers of Wallowa had put up hay on Mud Prairie and had shoveled a road to the stacks to get their cattle to feed. While the party was gone on snowshoes, Mr. Alford had been breaking

road as far as he could and returned to the cabin at night. He had had the road broken to Hideaway Spring, and was determined to go on. The latter part of January the party, except for Gregg, started. After being out a day or two, we were overtaken by Lorenzo Bacon and Harvey Wells, who were on their way to Lost Prairie. They decided that progress was too slow and turned back, went down Imnaha, thence down Snake River to the mouth of the Grande Ronde River, thence up the Grande Ronde River to Mr. Hansen's place, where they remained until about the first of March.

Mr. Wells located on a place which at this time is known as Buford Ridge, Mr. Buford purchasing the place from Mr. Wells. It somewhat discouraged the party when Mr. Bacon and Wells turned back, but we kept on going as far as we could in a day, turning our horses on the breaks of Davis and Joseph canyons to graze at night. In the vicinity of Sled Springs we decided to abandon the sled, as the snow was very deep, and by placing long poles through loops in the harness made "squaw sleds" [travois] by lashing cross pieces to poles behind the horse and tying packs on the poles. We had only one trail to break where we had two with a sled; the sled being left there gave Sled Springs the name it bears. Will Alford, now living at Chico, this county, was then about four years of age. He was tied on top of the pack on a [travois] and made the remainder of the journey that way. Mrs. Alford rode a saddle horse and carried the baby. The snow was so deep as to drag Mrs. Alford from her horse. The three men took turns going ahead or leading a horse, and as one would fag out, then put a fresh horse in the lead and the tired one behind. As the sun was going down on the seventh day after leaving Mud Prairie, we stopped in an open glade, the Johnson meadow where Flora is now located, and ate our last meal of that eventful trip, which consisted of sugar straight. All other provisions had given out.

We arrived at Mr. Allen's cabin that night at 11:30, being February 4. Allen lived in a 14 x 15 cabin until March 1, when each moved on to their claim. There were eight of us that wintered together in the Allen cabin. The spring of 1884 brought two more settlers, Mary Renfrow, my mother, and Rebecca Juday, who later became Mrs. Lazarus Wright. In October of the same year, James Fleet located here and later in the season moved his family to the homestead.

The fall of 1885, Dr. F. M. Mason and family moved from Cove to this place, and it was at Dr. Mason's home that the first social gathering, a dance in the early part of December 1885, was given on Sunday night. Robert Wright, a violinist, was in from the Grande Ronde and had his violin with him. It began to storm and Wright, fearing the snow would fall so deep on the mountain that he could not get through, decided to start on Monday, so a party was got up for Sunday night. Everybody in the Prairie was present except R. H. Bacon, who was afflicted with rheumatism and was unable to attend. Everybody danced—young and old, some in shirt sleeves, others in gumboots and German socks—until daybreak. And needless to say, everyone enjoyed themselves.

A polling place was established in Lost Prairie the spring of 1886. In 1887 a post office was established called Lost Prairie, with Ryan H. Bacon, postmaster. The mail was supplied from Teepee Springs, about eight miles north of Enterprise, and Mr. Bacon made the trip on horseback once a week without any pay. In the winter of 1887 and 1888, the first school district was organized and holds the number 10, there being only nine other districts in the county.

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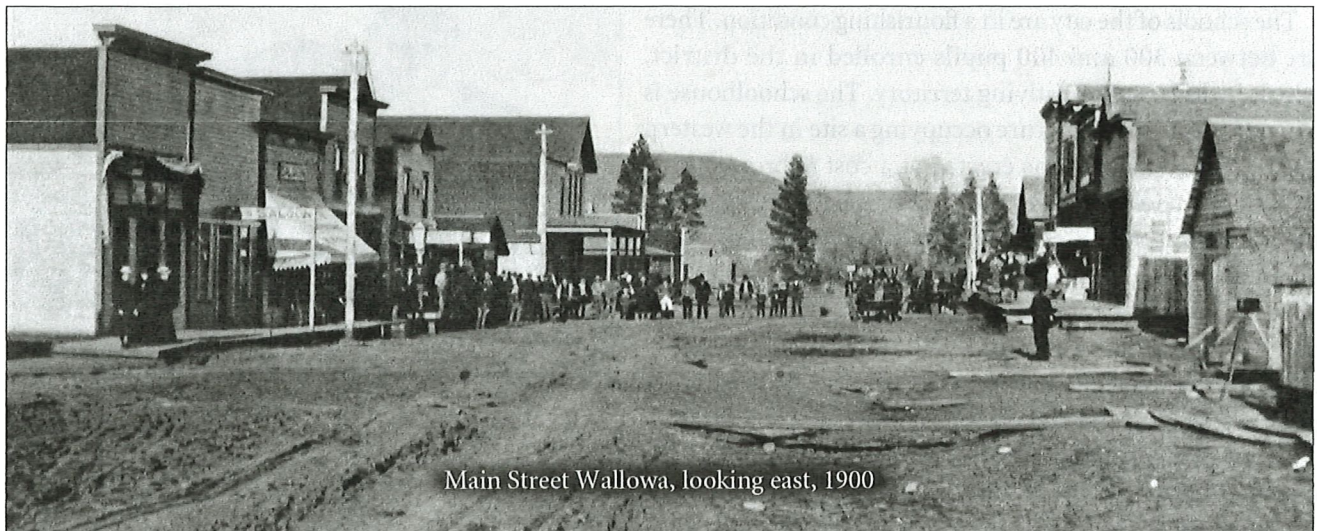
Lost Prairie's Landscape

What is known as Lost Prairie is a tract of land about eight or ten miles long by five or six miles wide, located in the northwestern part of the county along the Grande Ronde River. It is not, strictly speaking, a prairie country. It is rather a succession of benches separated by canyons. Here is a variety of climate, caused principally by differences in elevation. The lands on the benches, as well as those in the canyon valleys, are very productive. All the grains and all the fruits and berries that may be grown anywhere else in the county are successfully grown here. It is rich in agricultural possibilities as well as being a good grazing country. There are two school districts here, one in the northern and one in the southern half of the section. A post office was established in 1885. Lost Prairie is a very prosperous community, and there is certain to be a thriving business center somewhere along the river in the near future. — *An Illustrated History of Union and Wallowa Counties*, 1902

* * *

Lost Prairie's Population

Three years ago [1884], George Allen and his boy were the only inhabitants here. In August 1885, when I came in, there were sixteen; now [April 1887] there are over a hundred. — Dr. Frank M. Mason, pioneer physician in the area (The 1890 census lists a population of 133 in Lost Prairie; and the 1900 census, 269.)



Main Street Wallowa, looking east, 1900

Wallowa City

Adapted from “Towns of Wallowa County: Wallowa City—Its History, Various Enterprises and Mercantile Firms, Schools, Churches, Fraternities, Etc.,” – *An Illustrated History of Union and Wallowa Counties* (1902)

(Note: The time frame for this history is approximately 1899–1901.)

Wallowa has been called the “Gate City” of the valley. There is but one route into and out of Wallowa County that is in general use by freighters and travelers, and this is the highway traveled by the Joseph and Elgin stages. In entering the county from Elgin, Wallowa is the first town on the stage line. When the traveler emerges from the canyon the view suddenly widens, a rolling, hill-girt landscape is pictured before him, and after another hour’s ride he is near the geographical center of the northern and lower valley of the Wallowa River, where is situated the town of Wallowa. To the east, west, and south of town are higher altitudes, hills and mountains greeting the eye in whatever direction it is turned; and even on the north—the course followed by the river—the immediate surroundings are comparatively high.

The Wallowa River flows just east of the city, furnishing water power for mills and adding greatly to the natural beauty of the surroundings. This is the center of a very prosperous farming and stock-raising community. While there is not a great deal of grain freighted out of this part of the county, all the small grains are grown successfully and command a price from home-consumers generally in excess of the market price outside the county.

In adjacent hill and mountain regions are extensive stock ranges. The camps of the herder not only look to the merchants of Wallowa for supplies, but they also provide a market for hay in the feeding season. The farmers find hay a very profitable crop. The fields of grain are frequently converted into hay to satisfy the demands of the stockmen.

This limits the supply of wheat and oats and accounts for the good prices that always prevail. These conditions prevailing in the immediate vicinity of Wallowa make of it a prosperous city, and, as all surrounding outside interests are becoming each year more extensive and profitable, Wallowa will of necessity continue to grow in extent and importance as a business center, and will remain, as it is now, one of the principal towns of the county.

The Island City Mercantile and Milling Company laid the foundations of Wallowa by opening a general store in 1889 [at the northwest corner of First and Storie streets]. Since that date, there has been a gradual and substantial growth. There is now a population of something over 300.

The citizens are progressive and the homes, streets, and stores present a neat and attractive appearance. A system of water works has been installed and also an electric light plant. The water works belongs to the city. The lighting plant is owned by the Wallowa Mercantile Company. The city was incorporated in 1899. *The Wallowa News* issued its first edition March 3, 1899.



Wallowa Mercantile Co., est. 1889

The schools of the city are in a flourishing condition. There are between 300 and 400 pupils enrolled in the district, which includes some outlying territory. The schoolhouse is a handsome frame structure occupying a site in the western part of the town and was erected at a cost approximating \$1,800. So inadequate has this building become, however, that last year it was necessary to rent two additional rooms in another building to provide accommodations commensurate with the increased enrollment. Eight grades are maintained, and during the years 1899 and 1900 the Wallowa Academy afforded high school privileges to those who wished to pursue studies in advance of the common school grades. There is evident demand for opportunities to pursue the higher studies.

Wallowa has one church building, the Methodist, which was built in 1899. Other denominations have organizations and it is only a question of a short time when other churches will be built.

The following orders are represented by flourishing lodges: The IOOF [Independent Order of Odd Fellows], K of P [Knights of Pythias], W of W [Woodworkers of the World], MWA [Modern Woodmen of America], Maccabees, Eastern Star, and the Circle.

There are two sawmills near Wallowa. A planing mill is also in operation. A flouring mill is operated by the Wallowa Mercantile Company and does an extensive business.

A business directory of the city includes:

Wallowa Mercantile Company, which conducts a general store, an implement house, a warehouse and a harness and saddle shop.

Rounsavell and Mumford, hardware.

Charles Brown, general variety store.

William Sherod, dry goods and groceries.

McDonald Brothers, meat market.

J.A. Lauman, livery stable.

Theodore Williams, stationery and notions.

L.J. Coverstone, jeweler.

J.P. Morelock, barber shop and notions.

J.H. McMullen, photographer.

Miss Crone, milliner.

Charles Hauprich, boarding house.

T.L. Davis, blacksmith.

McDaniel and Donald, real estate and insurance.

O.M. Corkins, attorney at law.

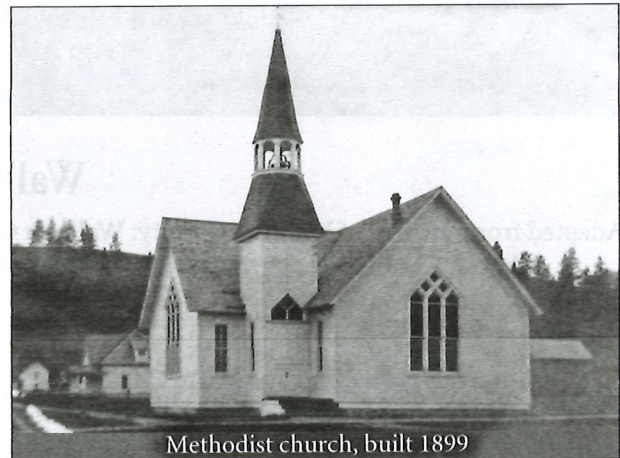
G.W. Gregg, physician.

Miss Maggie Bunnell is postmistress and Theodore Williams, deputy.

Visitors to the city are received very cordially and are well cared for by J.S. Smith, proprietor of the Wallowa Hotel.



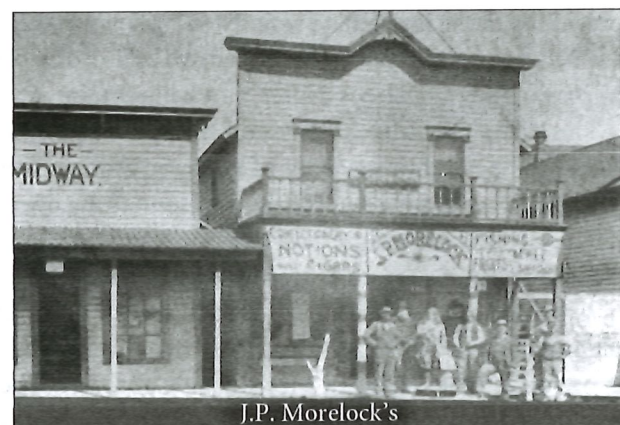
Wallowa public school, built 1897



Methodist church, built 1899



L.J. Coverstone and jewelry store



J.P. Morelock's

One Building's History

By Katie Lyman

Adapted from *The Wallowa Record* (February 11, 1960)

If walls could talk, the old building next door to the old Telephone Building might be able to write a book about the people who have lived and run businesses there. Men this week were busy tearing down the structure. Old-timers along Main Street began recalling all the different enterprises that had started there. Jim Evans, his brother George, and Walter Alford were partners in a sawmill on Dry Creek. They built the building now being razed. That was in 1895. Many different businesses have been there since. A jinx seemed to be on the place, Jerry Maxwell recalled, and most of the businesses failed.

Hubert Johnson was the last to occupy it, using it as storage and a shop for his appliances. Before that, it was a restaurant [the Club Cafe].

At one time it housed *The Wallowa Sun*. That was back in 1911.

[In 1919] the building was turned into a steam laundry. [Earlier, it had served as John Langmo's carpenter shop.]

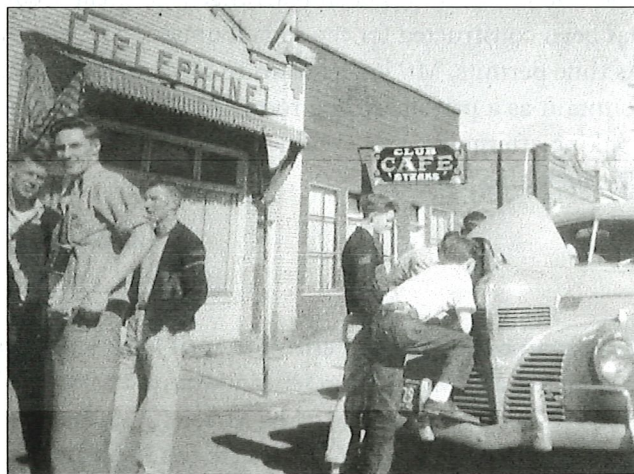
One man bought it and opened a variety store. He also planned a saloon, but the country went dry, and he changed his plans.

J.H. Hayes once had a shoe shop there.

Tony Sherod opened a butcher shop, which ran only a short time.

Jerry Maxwell bought the shop's equipment and moved it to his butcher shop that was located where the post office now stands [on Main Street]. Another time, when a restaurant closed up, Jerry bought the furniture and equipment. He moved it to a frame building where J.C. Baird had a restaurant. The Baird restaurant burned. When the block burned where Charlie Fisher now has his barbershop, he moved to the building and had his shop there for six months.

So the saga runs. Old buildings never die; they are just torn down to make way for progress.



"The old building," adjacent to the Telephone Building on Wallowa's Main Street, in 1918 (left) and 1943 (right).

The Club Cafe, 1949–1951

Club Cafe Owner Dies

From *The Wallowa Record* (June 2, 1949)

Frank L. Plaster, popular Wallowa businessman and owner of the Club Cafe here, died at 6:30 Monday evening of a heart ailment. Although Mr. Plaster had not been in the best of health for several months, he was about his duties each day, greeting people as they came into his establishment. Only a few weeks ago, he and Mrs. Plaster had

made a trip to Idaho to visit their children. Mr. and Mrs. Plaster had been in business in Wallowa for a little over a year, having come here in May of last year to take over the Club Cafe.

Club Cafe Dancing

From *The Wallowa Record* (December 7, 1950)

Young people of Wallowa have been enjoying dancing to the juke box at the Club Cafe on recent evenings. Layton Jeffers, proprietor, has rearranged fixtures, removed about half of the cafe booths to accommodate a small dancing space. Before embarking on the project, he took the matter up with the city council, advising them he would keep a careful watch of developments, putting a stop to rough play or loud talk. The young people have been most cooperative and appreciative of the opportunity to get together and dance. They have taken it on themselves to make it a clean, wholesome, and decent recreation meeting place, Mr. Jeffers reports. Mr. Jeffers is going ahead with further improvements to the floor and the arrangement. He says that young folks and old alike are welcome to come in and use the juke box and dance without charge. The dancing will be closed at 9:30 each school evening, and at midnight Friday and Saturday nights.

.....
CLUB CAFE
Open from 5:30 to 10:00
Home made Pies
Home cooked Meals
Friendly Atmosphere
F. L. Plaster, proprietor
.....

Club Cafe Remodeled

From *The Wallowa Record* (June 28, 1951)

The Club Cafe, redecorated and remodeled, reopened for business Sunday after being closed for two months. The business has now been divided into two separate stores—the Club Cafe in which two booths have been added, and the C & L Fountain. Mrs. Layton Jeffers is operating the cafe, and the Jeffers' daughter, Carol, is in charge of the fountain. Layton Jeffers will continue his employment with D.L. Davis, contractor. Mr. Jeffers and family have spent their spare time in remodeling the interior of the building. The cafe's kitchen has been rearranged for greater convenience. A separate enclosure has been constructed for the soda fountain, popcorn, candy, and notions departments. As time permits, Mr. Jeffers plans to redecorate the area formerly occupied by the soda fountain as a private dining room. Mrs. John Berry is cooking at the Club Cafe mornings; and Mrs. Jeffers is cooking afternoons and evenings. Bernadine Pullen is waitress. Hours for the cafe and fountain are 8 a.m. every day, including Sundays.

Have You Tried Our
Home-made Pies?
Coffee 5c
THE CLUB CAFE
D.G. & L. L. JEFFERS

Club Cafe Changes Owners

From *The Wallowa Record* (April 3, 1952)

In a business transaction effective April 1, Mr. and Mrs. Luther Feik of Minam bought the Club Cafe in Wallowa from Mr. and Mrs. Layton Jeffers. Mrs. And Mrs. Feik began remodeling the interior Tuesday and will be open for business in a short while. Mr. and Mrs. Jeffers, who have operated the Club Cafe for the past two years, have moved from the home at the rear of the cafe to the business space formerly occupied by the Wallowa Supply Company. Their business plans for the future are not ready for announcement. [The Jeffers opened a gift shop at the new site and ran it for two years.] Mr. Feik has been engaged in logging and plans to continue in that line of work, while Mrs. Feik operates the restaurant.

Club Cafe Changes Business

From *The Wallowa Record* (September 11, 1952)

Hubert Johnson recently purchased the former Club Cafe building from Verrell Blaisdell, now of Bremerton, Washington. Mr. Johnson plans to rebuild the building to provide display space for lines of merchandise for which he is local distributor, and also to provide his plumbing and electric workshop. Mr. Johnson said he did not expect to undertake any of the rebuilding and remodeling yet this year.

Ask the Wallowa History Center

How was the 1876 confrontation between Chief Joseph and Wallowa settlers finally resolved?

"Tomorrow is the day the Indians have notified the whites to leave [and] give up McNall and Findley." – Lt. Albert Gallatin Forse

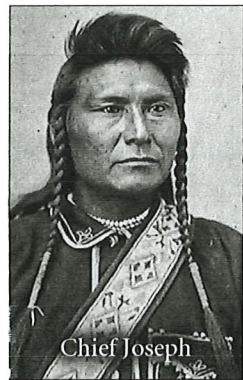
Lieutenant Forse & Chief Joseph

The resolution was worked out primarily through the efforts and skills of one man: Lieutenant Albert Gallatin Forse (1841-1898) of the First U.S. Cavalry, then stationed at Fort Walla Walla. Almost single-handedly—he left his company of 48 troops and was accompanied by only an interpreter—Lt. Forse negotiated face-to-face with Chief Joseph to end the conflict that had erupted that summer when a member of Joseph's Wallowa Band was shot and killed by Wallowa homesteaders Alexander B. Findley and Wells McNall. In response, Joseph had given the settlers a week to leave the valley, the settlers had called for help, and both militia and cavalry raced to the rescue. Lt. Forse found Joseph near Wallowa Lake, at the head of "100 painted warriors...drawn up in line of battle." Following is Lt. Forse's recollection of his meeting with Chief Joseph.

The first time I ever met Joseph was in September 1876, the day upon which he had told the settlers in the Wallowa Valley...and [militia] volunteers from Indian and Grande Ronde valleys that he would meet them and decide the question then in dispute, the right to the Wallowa Valley. [The settlers] had called outsiders to their assistance and said they were going to kill [Joseph] and his Indians. But [Joseph] was willing to give them an opportunity to do so in a fair fight, even sending word to his enemies where he could be found, something unheard of in Indian warfare. Fortunately, I succeeded by making a forced march of 88 miles in a little over 25 hours and arriving in time to prevent hostilities, feeling satisfied that if I could get an interview with Joseph, he would give up his hostile intentions.

I secured a guide and found [Joseph] seven miles distant where he had informed the volunteers he would meet them. His command was posted upon quite a high bluff, the approaches to which, although pretty steep, were free from bushes, trees, and everything else that would obstruct his [rifle] fire or shelter an enemy, being a natural glacis. His men were mounted in line in war paint, and with but few exceptions, stripped to the breechclout although it was in September, a high altitude, and a very cold day.

As Joseph rode out and dismounted, I thought he was the finest looking Indian I had ever seen, not only physically but intelligently. He was about six feet in height and powerfully built, with strength of character written on every feature. I saw he had complete control over his warriors during our parley of two hours. Although his men were naked and shivering with cold, not one moved out of ranks except the sub-chiefs and an interpreter. After our parley we came to terms, and during my stay with him of nearly three weeks, in which time we had several councils, I became more and more impressed with his worth.



I found upon visiting his camp a mile in the rear, where his women and children were, that it was ably chosen. An enemy could not approach him without being under his fire for the distance of more than half a mile. At the same time, it perfectly protected his camp, which was in an angle formed on the right by Wallowa Lake, and on the left by a very high, rugged, and steep mountain which could not be descended on his side if climbed, and which could not be turned. The only way by which his camp could be approached was by the right and front, in which case the enemy would have had to cross the Wallowa River, which was perfectly commanded from his position. Had the volunteers attacked him there, I do not believe one would have escaped. Joseph could easily have fallen upon the settlers in detail, killing them and destroying their property. – Lt. Albert G. Forse, First U.S. Cavalry



For the next 22 years, Lt. Forse continued to serve his country wherever it called him. Finally, in the summer of 1898, at the age of 57, he was killed in action at the Battle of San Juan Hill in Cuba while serving as a major in the First U.S. Cavalry during the Spanish-American War. He is buried in Arlington National Cemetery next to his wife Virginia.

Have a question about Wallowa history? Send it to the Wallowa Quarterly editor (highberg@eoni.com), and we'll try to answer it.

WALLOWA QUARTERLY

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Wallowa History Center

602 W 1st St • PO Box 481 • Wallowa, OR 97885 • 541-886-8000 • wallhistcenter@gmail.com • www.wallowahistory.org



Road Maintenance: Ideas From Neighboring States, 1902

Straw Day

From *The Wallowa News* (September 12, 1902)

The Walla Walla county is a good section, but its one great drawback is the great quantity of dust in the summer months. To remedy this, the farmers and businessmen have united in an effort to better the condition of the roads by setting apart a day known as "Straw Day." On this day, all turn out and haul loads of straw and scatter it on the dusty highway...The next step for Walla Walla to take is to permanently improve by graveling. The straw only lasts one season, and the work must be done over each year.

Wide Tires

From *The Wallowa News* (November 14, 1902)

Doubtless the best way to keep an earth road, or any other road for that matter, in repair is by the use of wide tires on all wagons carrying heavy burdens. Water and narrow tires aid each other in destroying streets, macadam, gravel, and earth roads. Narrow tires are also among the most destructive agents to fields, pastures, and meadows of farms, while, on the other hand, wide tires are road makers. They roll and harden the surface, and every loaded wagon becomes in effect a road roller. Nothing so much tends to the improvement of a road as the continued rolling of its surface. Tests made at the experiment stations in Utah and Missouri show that wide tires not only improve the surface of roads, but that under ordinary circumstances less power is required to pull a wagon on which wide tires are used. (Originally printed in the *Grangeville News*, Grangeville, Idaho.)

Wallowa History Center

"Connecting people with the history of the
Wallowas to foster vibrant rural communities
for the future."

602 W 1st St

PO Box 481

Wallowa, Oregon 97885

541-886-8000

January 19, 2021

Dear Members and Friends of the Wallowa History Center,

A new year is upon us, and I'm proud to announce two new exciting projects that the Wallowa History Center is undertaking.

First, we're experimenting with a new format with the *Wallowa Quarterly*. The next issue, due out in March 2021, will arrive in your mailbox as a 16 page, printed magazine on glossy paper! This new and improved version of the newsletter will allow for more historical content in each issue and provide history center members with a more durable, collectable booklet to save in your personal libraries for future reference and enjoyment. After you receive it, we'd love to hear your thoughts. Many thanks to Mark Highberger, editor of the Quarterly, Mary Ann Burrows and John and Cindy Gaterud for their support and work on this exciting new project.

Secondly, the work on the Bear-Sleds compound site plan is progressing apace. We are currently soliciting bids for the detailed survey work to be completed on the grounds. The survey will help clarify the legal boundaries of the grounds and provide the framework for the work of the site plan. We're thankful to the city of Wallowa for their support in this survey work and for the expertise and knowledge of Henry Kunowski, of our site planner. The finalized site plan, which we expect to complete by the end of the July, will provide us with a detailed plan as we continue restoration work and move towards an interpretive space in the warehouse building.

Thank you all for the continued support!

Warm Regards,

David Weaver, President

