The Most Unique Crossing on the Oregon Trail

The most outstanding crossing ever made by a wagon train on the Oregon Trail was led by a hearse that contained the body of a dead man. It had a strange hallowed effect on the Indians, for not one shot was fired at the caravan, nor was it harassed in any way and not one life was lost on the long trip. Historian Steward Holbrook in his book “Far Corners” states “Willie Keil's 2,000-mile trek was the most unique crossing in American history. He was dead and in his coffin before the team was harnessed. Yet no flanking rifleman ever awed the enemies of a column of pioneers half so well as Willie Keil and his hearse.”

Willie’s father was Dr. William Keil, noted leader and founder of the Christian Colonies of Bethel, Missouri and Aurora, Oregon. The colony of Bethel had outgrown its boundaries, more land was needed and rather than buy high priced land in Missouri, the Doctor decided to start another colony on the West Coast, where he could get free land through the Donation Land Grant in Washington and Oregon. When the advance party returned with a glowing report, his 19-year-old son, Willie, was the most excited person in the colony, his enthusiasm spurred preparation for departure. May 23, 1855 was set for the day when 35 heavy wagons, 250 travelers and a large herd of livestock would leave. But malaria, the dreaded scourge of the frontier, struck—Willie Keil became delirious. He begged his father to let him lead the caravan as he promised but on May 19, Willie died. To Dr. Keil a promise was as sacred in death as it was in life.

The doctor ordered a lead-lined casket made, which he filled with alcohol and placed his son's body in it. He then had the coffin strapped to a light wagon. When everything was in order, the Doctor blew a long blast on his silver trumpet and the caravan moved West, led by a light

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Fight for River Right-of-Way

Our first settlers found the Yamhill River to be a ready-made highway. Boats zigzagged around the obstacles, making their way as far as Lafayette. Loggers floated logs down to Carlton from almost 50 miles above the mouth. The stream afforded a more reliable means of transportation to downriver markets than any overland road or trail.

The Oregonian reported in 1865: “So much rain falls that it is difficult to keep the roads in repair” The paper went on to say: “Most farmers from the interior who haul their produce to the Willamette River for the market complain that the roads are in bad condition at the most important season of the year—just when their produce is ready for market.”

The popularity of the river as a route of commerce led to

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President’s Letter

YCHS Members,

We’ve seen some extraordinary weather in February, unfortunately causing the cancellation of our February General Meeting. We’ll get back to our normal schedule with the next meeting scheduled for March 9th at the Heritage Center. We had also intended to support an Amity/Dayton fundraising event on the 8th at the Stoller Winery with a display of our covered wagon and stage coach. That was also cancelled and will be rescheduled. We hope to provide support for them later.

Otherwise, we had a successful display at the Portland Agricultural Show on January 28th to 30th. It was said that we had the best exhibit there, creating lots of interest. On April 26th and 27th we will have tractors and the covered wagon at the Salem Ag Fest. If you have the opportunity, please visit our display. The Education Committee will be beginning their annual Pioneer Days program on April 28th. This event has been fully subscribed and we anticipate another successful educational opportunity for the grade schoolers in attendance.

At the February Board of Directors meeting we approved the Activities and Events Committee Charter. They are laying out all of our annual events as well as some additional activities, including an Oregon State Birthday Party on February 14th at the Lafayette Poling Church. This event will have passed by the time you read this. I hope that you had the chance to stop by. Creating updated committee charters has been a slow process, but we are progressing in the development of an improved committee structure. Along with the committees we are applying a more organized budget process for 2014. The Board approved spending on several capital projects for additional work at the Heritage Center and looks forward to a complete capital budget for 2014 soon. While we do not as yet have a response from the Ford Family Foundation regarding our grant request for the Heritage Hall project, the Heritage Center Development and Operations Committee is working on a plan to start work on various aspects of the project. We have currently available funds that can produce significant progress and will be able to define the entire scope of work as soon as we hear from the Ford Family Foundation.

Among approved projects, the lighting of the new signage on the Heritage Center is progressing well. We should see the results soon. The cupola and chimney for the Hutchcroft School is in the planning stage and construction should begin this summer.

The Farm Fest Committee has begun planning for Farm Fest to be held April 12th. This is always a premier event for the YCHS. If you can help with it I’m sure Pam Watts would like to hear from you. Otherwise, set aside the date and come out and join us.

Steve Leonard
YCHS President
Phone: (503) 472-6908
Email: sleonard15@frontier.com
Submitted: February 15, 2014
Happy Birthday Oregon! What a nice event. Many visitors joined us at the museum on Valentine’s day to celebrate Oregon’s 155th birthday. Tours of both buildings were followed by birthday cake and punch. Many members as well as new friends enjoyed our new exhibits and displays provided by Karen Sitton-Saxberg and her family. Thanks to all who supported this event and if you missed the fun, stop in for a visit.

The Lafayette volunteers were very busy during our January closing. We made updates and improvements to our research department as well as changed exhibits in the Poling Church. Watch for more changes!

Wish List: We could use some grocery size paper bags.

Weather Alert: Just a reminder that we are closed, along with the schools, during bad weather. Spring is just around the corner….

Jean Sartor, Publications and the Lafayette Ladies

COMMITTEE CHAIRS

**Accessions Lafayette:**
Ursula Doud

**Accessions/Restoration Heritage Center:**
Cliff Watts

**Activities and Events:**
Pam Watts

**Audit:**
Jo McIntire

**Blacksmith Shop:**
Jeff Monahan

**Budget:**
John Lewis

**Business Plan & Grant Review:**
Steve Leonard

**Education Committee:**
Cynthia Christensen

**Farm/Harvest Fest:**
Cliff and Pam Watts

**Governance:**
Carolyn Meeker

**Handmade Holidays:**
Karen Sitton-Saxberg

**Hutchcroft School:**
Steve Leonard

**Insurance Committee:**
Tony Meeker

**Lafayette Development & Operations:**
Karen Sitton-Saxberg

**Lafayette Pioneer Cemetery:**
Todd Holt

**Landscaping:**
Gloria Lutz—Heritage Center
Garry Coats—Lafayette

**Miller Museum:**
Maryjoe Owens

**Photographic Project:**
Tom Cattrall

**Publications/Gift Shop:**
Jean Sartor

**Sawmill:**
Don King

**Secrets of the Past Tours:**
Karen Sitton-Saxberg

**Steam Engine:**
Vern Yeager

**Treasures in the Attic:**
Carolyn Meeker
Farm Fest &
Plowing Competition

Saturday, April 12, 2014
Yamhill Valley Heritage Center
10 am—4 pm

Largest Gathering of Draft Horses & Mules in Oregon to compete in plowing competition

Rare opportunity to watch 20+ teams of draft horses & mules in a plowing competition, see demonstrations & meet the teamsters. Shires, Belgians, Percherons, Clydesdales, Hallingers and Mules

11275 SW Durham Lane, McMinnville, Oregon
(Intersection of Hwy. 18 & Durham Ln.)

• Plowing, Demos and Activities throughout the day
• Plowing Competition Awards 3:30
• Opening Ceremonies & Flag Raising by VFW 10:00
• Sawmill, Blacksmith, Horseshoeing Demonstrations
• “Agriculture in Art” photo and art exhibit by student, amateur & professional artists
• Pioneer Kids’ Area with Hands-on Activities & Animals
• Heritage Center Museum Tours & Historical Displays
• Old-Time Music, Food, & More!

$5 admission—
Kids 12 & under FREE

Come back for the harvest & old time family fun at Harvest Fest
August 16 & 17

For more information, call 503-434-0490 or go to www.yamhillcountyhistory.org.
....meanwhile at the Log Cabin

We welcome volunteer Samantha “Sam” Davis, who dedicates her Saturdays to sorting and indexing our “Large Frame” picture collection. Sam is a senior at Yamhill-Carlton High School. We truly appreciate Sam. Her organizational skills and dedication to the task have allowed us to make great progress in shaping up the “Large Frame” collection.

Ursula Doud
Fight for River Right-of-Way Continued

many a conflict. Log-floating was a particular point of contention. W.A. Howe of Carlton Lumber Company would cut logs upstream on the North Yamhill, build a splash dam, dump the logs into the resulting pond, then release the floodgates and let the rush of water carry the logs downstream. Inevitably, the floating logs damaged property as they made their way downstream.

The family of D.P. Trullinger, who arrived in Oregon in 1848 and settled near Yamhill, would eventually join the aggrieved in a major way. Around 1870, he built a grist mill west of town on the old Yamhill-Tillamook stage route. There already was a small dam on the river, so he rebuilt it and used the fall of the water to turn his water wheels. In 1900, his son, Carl, decided to make use of water power that was going to waste at night. He obtained a generator so he could produce electricity when the mill wasn’t running and sold it to the people in the area.

Then one day, Howe released a load of logs upstream and they washed right over the dam! The destruction was complete. Carl Trullinger sued Howe for damages. However, Judge William Galloway ruled the North Yamhill River was navigable from the splash dams to its mouth. Thus, there was a public highway that could not legally be obstructed. Galloway said the plaintiff had a right to maintain and operate his dam, but had to modify it to allow free use of the river. He said the defendant had a right to maintain and operate his splash dams, but must be responsible for any damages to structures not interfering with the free flow.

Later that year, Howe was back before a judge. It seems Trullinger had not only left his dam in place, he had raised it six feet. Now, instead of ripping on over it, Howe’s logs merely backed up behind it. Howe complained he had six million board feet of timber stuck behind the dam. The judge ordered Trullinger to cut a gate in the middle to let the logs through and fined him $50 for contempt. Trullinger appealed all the way to the Oregon Supreme Court. In October 1908, the circuit court was reversed: Howe was forever restrained from operating his splash dams.

Winter Wonderland at the Historical Society

However, he continued (out of spite) floating logs downriver, causing serious damage. The battle went on until both men were forced out of business by larger competitors. The result was surely not to the satisfaction of either party.

Tales From the Past by Jim and Reita Lockett
wagon bearing a black casket and guarded at all times by two men. Then it moved ahead of the long column like the Ark of the Covenant when the Israelites moved through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land.

Not only did his caravan travel in safety from the Indians, it traveled with a special blessing. There was little loss of stock, no sickness and no fevers. The plagues of cholera and typhoid, that had devastated so many caravans, did not touch his. (In 1852, 6,000 people died of cholera on the Oregon Trail. Some historians claim there are 15 graves to every mile of the Oregon Trail.)

There is no question about the effect Willie's body had on the Indians. When the caravan was a short way out of Fort Laramie, it was stopped by a band of Indian warriors. They wanted to see what was in the black box. When the Doctor lifted the lid and they looked at the body of a dead man floating in a strange colorless liquid that kept it in a state of perfect preservation, they were terrified. Here was a medicine man who could preserve the dead.

Historian Russell Blankenship says, "Never was the hand of the red man raised against the men of Bethel. For years and years the Indians of Nebraska and Wyoming told with unflagging wonderment the story of the singing immigrant train which was led by a dead man."

The colonists were all outstanding musicians and music played an important part in their crossing. They carried a great array of instruments and song and played about the camp fire at night and often on the long march. There were times when the whole cavalcade, including the loose stock, would be in step with the music. It shortened the miles, lifted their spirits and charmed the savage red man.

One day when the train was inching its way up the Platte River in Wyoming, the lead scout spotted a large band of Sioux warriors advancing. As the chief rode out from his armed men, a scout rode back to meet him, sending back word for the caravan to sing. Horns, stringed instruments and drums struck up a melody and 250 lusty voices broke into song.

Whether these Indians came in war or in peace no one will ever know. That day they stood motionless in the hot sun, watching a marvel they had never seen before and would never see again—a caravan of 250 singers, led by a dead man.

It was after leaving Wyoming that travel became extremely difficult. There was always the race against time; the Rockies were still ahead, and beyond them the Cascades. Keil did not dare to let winter reach the mountains before his caravan. There were also the mirages that danced ahead of the wagons, with beautiful blue lakes, only to vanish into hot burning sand. The wind blew, coating men's raw throats and tongues with dust, burning their eyes with alkali and grinding tempers raw.

There were flash storms when lightning crashed and large hail stones came down in salvos. Most of the time the cruel sun beat down without mercy and there was no place to hide.

All along the way there was discarded furniture, a grim reminder that some family had parted with cherished heirlooms. There were the white bones of horses and cattle, broken and discarded wagons, and newly dug graves.

Worst of all were the scenes of Indian attack where all that remained were the twisted iron rims and steel braces of the burned wagons. Dead cattle and horses lay in grotesque shapes and the decaying bodies of the massacred victims lay unburied in the hot sun. Scenes like these can do strange things to any man's personality and especially to a leader who is responsible for the safety and welfare of 250 souls.

The worst part of the crossing was the desert west of Fort Hall. Here the Trail was literally mapped out by the graves and bones along the way. In places there were over a hundred carcasses to the mile. The dust in places was knee deep. For miles there was neither grass nor water. Three and four head of stock died every day on this stretch, but they yoked and harnessed more of the loose stock and kept going. In spite of this, the Doctor kept up their morale by his positive attitude. He prophesied that all of the wagons would get through—and they did.

The Indians, who massacred other caravans, helped this one through. Dr. Keil treated the red men with kindness. He fed them when they were hungry, nursed them when they were sick, and they returned his favors. When his caravan missed the trail, two friendly Indians guided it back.

Other caravans were constantly losing stock to the Indian night raiders. Only once did the raiders touch his stock, and the next morning he met a group of Indians he had befriended driving the animals back to his wagon.

No man on the Oregon Trail was more highly respected by the Indians than Dr. Keil. They showered him with gifts and urged him to live with them. In his letters Keil wrote: "My greatest joy on the plains was meeting the Indians."

On November 1st, 1855, five months and one week after leaving Bethel, his wagon train arrived at Willapa Bay in Washington. They averaged 12 1/2 miles a day including all stops. Not one life was lost. Every wagon that left Bethel arrived in Washington.

The body of Willie Keil was not buried until the day after Christmas. His grave marks the spot where the first pioneer was buried and the conclusion of the most fantastic wagon crossing ever made in America. But most of all it stands as a monument to fidelity; where a father fulfilled a promise to his son.

The Most Unique Crossing on the Oregon Trail by Art Fee from Little Known Tales from Oregon History.
YCHS Membership Application

**Membership Categories**

- **NEW MEMBERSHIP**
- **RENEWING MEMBERSHIP**

Members receive The West Side newsletter (10 issues per year), free admission to the Lafayette Museum and Library, access to genealogical and historical files, access to the Yamhill Valley Heritage Center, monthly potluck and program for members, invitations to special programs and events, and 10% off photo orders and gift shop purchases.

**Membership runs from July 1 to June 30 of each year.**

- Senior/Student/Educator $15
- Senior Family (65+) $25
- Individual $20
- Family (Basic) $30
- Friend $55
- Supporter $125+
- Community Builder $250+
- Community Benefactor $500+

Name: __________________________
Address: __________________________
City: __________________________ State: _____ Zip Code: ______
Phone: __________________________ Email: __________________________

I would prefer to receive the YCHS newsletter via:  □ Email  □ Postal Mail

I would like to volunteer to help with activities of the YCHS. Please contact me.

Please click here if you do not wish to have your name and contact information released to the Yamhill County Cultural Coalition and/or for the purpose of obtaining grant funding. Member information will never be sold or released for any other purpose unless written consent is provided by the member.

Please make checks payable to YCHS and return with this printed form to:

YCHS, P.O. Box 484, Lafayette, OR 97127

Questions? Call Membership Coordinator Carlene Kadell (503) 474-0480 or email: amity1956@yahoo.com