OREGON ODDITIES

AND

ITEMS OF INTEREST

Pioneer Days and Ways

Series 2 - Number 12

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The Federal Writers' and Historical Records Survey Projects
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WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION OF OREGON
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The items in this bulletin, selected from the material compiled by the Federal Writers' Project and the Historical Records Survey of the Works Progress Administration, are representative of the significant collections being made by these nation-wide programs.

The Historical Records Survey is inventorying all sources of early Oregon history, including county and state records; town and church archives; historic cemeteries; old manuscripts and imprints; old printing presses; monuments and relics; private diaries, letters and memoirs; historic buildings; and Indian records and lore.

The chief undertaking of the Federal Writers' Project has been the American Guide Series of books. State guide books have been published for Idaho, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Delaware, Mississippi, Rhode Island, South Dakota, North Dakota and Vermont. The manuscript for the Oregon Guide is completed and will be ready for release this spring. The Oregon Guide, the first authentic tourist guide of the state, is fully illustrated and will contain several chapters dealing with history, government, industry and commerce, labor, transportation, agriculture and education. Half the Guide will be devoted to tours of major Oregon highways, with points of interest logged mile by mile.

The Oregon Federal Writers' Project has written and distributed the following books:

- Flax in Oregon
- Builders of Timberline Lodge
- Fire Prevention in Portland
- History of Portland Fire Alarm System

The Oregon Historical Records Survey has written and distributed the following publications:

- The Inventory of the Archives of Morrow County
- Diary of Basil Longworth, Oregon Pioneer
- Transportation Items from the Weekly Oregonian
- Married Woman's Separate Property Rights
- Letter from Luckiamute Valley, 1846
- Daily Sales of an Auburn Store, 1868
- Abstract of a Pioneer Road, 1864-1911
- From Corvallis to Crescent City, 1874
- County Histories, University of Oregon, The Commonwealth Review
Pioneer Days and Ways is an attempt to give a word picture of a past era in the history of the state — a glimpse into the life of the average individual who lived in Oregon when the state was young. The incidents given were obtained through research and interviews with the pioneers themselves, who can recall the Oregon of fifty, sixty, seventy or more years ago.

Wagon Cover Coats. In early Oregon the problem of obtaining clothing was so acute that tents and wagon covers which had seen service across the plains were made into coats. These garments, lined with remnants of woolen material and trimmed with collar and cuffs faced with beaver or otter fur, passed without criticism. The indelible marks used to brand canvas indicated the origin of the coats, but custom sanctioned the crude clothing and no one criticized the branned garments.

Wolf Hair. Since there was neither wool nor cotton to be had in early Oregon, the first settlers sought a substitute and found it in the wool-like hair of the wolf. Wolf hair, however, was poor material for weaving cloth, because it was coarse and had little tensile strength. Unlike sheep, wolves could not be fleeced alive. Since one wolf pelt provided scarcely enough yarn to make slippers for a small child, it took a skilful hunter a month to obtain enough wolf-wool for a sweater.

Buckskin Clothing. The material most commonly used in making men's and boys' clothing was buckskin. Buckskin garments were fairly successful in a dry climate, but in a locality like the Willamette valley, the excessive rain frequently made them uncomfortable. Buckskin stretches when wet, becoming very pliable, but in drying shrinks and becomes hard. In drying, buckskin breeches often assumed a shape entirely unrelated to their original pattern. The distortion was not so noticeable when a man was sitting down, because the breeches in drying, accommodated themselves to that position, the knees and seat bagging. The wearer, upon standing, sometimes found it impossible to rise to his full height, the unyielding breeches compelling him to maintain the position they had assumed in drying. It is said that upon hunting expeditions during rainy weather, a man wearing buckskin clothing would be occupied a large part of his time in rolling up the constantly stretching legs of his breeches.

Even after it was possible to obtain bolt goods, buckskin was still a standby for men's and boys' clothing. Many living Oregon pioneers recall wearing buckskin, clothes as boys. These garments, unbeautiful but extremely serviceable, in stretching and drying frequently made grotesque figures of early Oregon adolescents.

"Self-rising." During the early 1850's in the southern Oregon mining camps, clothing was so scarce that even the most prosperous miner frequently found it necessary to patch his clothes with whatever material was available. Flour sacks were often in demand for this purpose. Since miners preferred self-rising flour, the sacks usually were identified by brightly printed labels. As a consequence, it was not at all unusual to discover a miner trudging around the diggings with the words "self-rising", emblazoned on his shoulder or on the seat of his pants.

The Sunday-Go-To-Meeting Suit. In early Oregon, as soon as a young man was able to save sufficient money, he provided himself with a suit of store clothes, a Sunday-go-to-meeting outfit made by eastern tailors. The costume preferred by young Oregon beaux, consisted of swallow-tail coats, fancy light colored vests, and striped trousers. These garments were topped by a high beaver hat. This costume was suitable for the most dignified and most formal occasions.

"Factory Cloth." After ships began making regular trips from the east coast to the west, heavy unbleached muslin, commonly called "factory cloth," was on sale at the stores in Willamette river towns. The women dyed this material with home-made dyes and made dresses from it for themselves and the little girls. Sometimes it was used to make shorts and trousers for the men and boys.

Black dye was made from charcoal, brown from the hulls of black walnut, and yellow
from boiled peach leaves. Previous to the importation of walnut and peach trees, a dye was made by boiling the leaves of native alder trees. These same dyes were used to color homespun wool cloth which became popular as soon as sheep were introduced into the Oregon country.

Pioneer Costumes. In describing costumes, one pioneer said the women's dresses "were very full skirted and lasted entirely too long." She also recalled that rather than overcoats, men wore homespun blankets, with holes cut in the center, the material falling loosely about the shoulders. Old spoons and other pieces of worn out table-ware were melted and cast in molds cut in blocks of soap stone to make buttons.

Shoes. Buckskin moccasins were worn by the first settlers in the Willamette valley. Later, shoes were manufactured at home. In almost every family was someone who could hew out a last, over which to make rough shoes. Those home-manufactured shoes were fairly comfortable and offered more protection to the feet than the yielding moccasins. However, as there were at first no competent tanners, rawhide was used to make boots and shoes. In winter when the wearer waded through mud and water, as he often had to do in pioneer Oregon, his rawhide boots became soft and many sizes too large. Sometimes they became so large that they slipped off the owner's feet. When they were recovered it took hours of drying and cleaning to make the boots comfortable for wear again.

Traveling shoemakers went from settlement to settlement making shoes to order. One pioneer recalls that the shoemaker who made the shoes for her family measured the foot lengths of each member of the family with broom straws. No attention was paid to the width of the shoes and they were made so they could be worn on either foot.

Wheat Hominy. Wheat hominy was a staple article of food in the early days of Oregon. The wheat or corn was hulled by using a lye solution which was leached from wood ashes. A coffee substitute was made by browning wheat in the oven.

In speaking of her childhood, one early settler said: "The very first feast day which I remember was when mother made apple cobbler for Christmas dinner. That was the first Christmas after we had cultivated fruit of our own. We children stood around and ate the apple peelings."

Pioneer Childhood. Those who were pioneer children agree that childhood then was much different from what it is today. There was little time for play outside of school time. The children were kept busy sewing, knitting, carding wool, churning, chopping wood, milking cows, and drying fruit.

"When I am asked to recall incidents of my early life and describe the games we played in my childhood," said one pioneer, "I can truthfully answer that there was no childhood in the sense meant. There were no games. All I can remember is 'work, work, work!' Work long before the sun came up, work long after sun had set. When I was eight years old I was doing real labor -- labor that would draw a man's wages today. Union working hours? Sit-down strikes? Such things were not dreamed of then."

Schools. Pioneers agree that the early day schools "did not amount to much." School was kept only a few months in the year. The only studies were reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, and grammar. A child was sent to school principally to learn his letters.

The games played at school were blackman, pussy-wants-a-corner and anti over.

The first schools were not supported by taxation but by private subscription. Each family contributed a certain amount towards the support of the school. Prosperous settlers often subscribed more than their quota so that the poorer children could have the benefit of school.

A pioneer who was a student at the Oregon Agricultural College during the years, 1887 and 1888, recalls that all students of agriculture were required as part of their class work to work on the campus a certain number of hours. If they worked longer hours than was required for credit, they were paid twenty cents an hour. "I helped dig the first ditch over dug to drain the campus and I helped build the administration building," reminisced the informant. "The country boys had an
advantage over the town boys in this work, for they had had more experience."

Churches. The churches had no young peoples' organizations and "they were dead serious about everything." The sermons lasted for hours, according to a pioneer, and they had the "smell of hell fire in them." The only social church gatherings were the camp meetings. A great deal of pioneer courting was carried on at the camp meetings. When a boy had reached marriageable age, his father would let him use the family "rig" for a trip to the camp meeting where he might meet a wife.

In at least one early Oregon church each family built its own pew, sized to suit its family needs. A big family had a long pew and a small family had a short one.

Social Life. The majority of the settlers disapproved of dances, horse races and similar recreations which they deemed to be of an immoral nature. Spelling bees and singing schools were the most common amusements.

Everybody sang, -- in duets, quartets and sextets, -- and there were singing schools everywhere. The singing schools are recalled as being "pitch fights of voices," "Gypsy's Warning", "The Empty Chair", "Brooklyn Theater" and "Only a Pansy Blossom", as well as hymns, were popular at singing school.

In the spelling bee, the two outstanding spellers in the community having chosen sides, the district teacher would select and give out the words. No definitions were given, and consequently as in the case of homonyms, the speller was often confused as to which meaning was intended. One pioneer recalls winning a match on the word "sue". The spellers before him were not sure whether the word given was Sioux, sew, sou, or sue. Three went down attempting the various forms of the homonym. By the process of elimination he spelled the word intended and won the five dollar prize of the evening. "Assafotida" doomed many spellers at a bee.

Many kissing games, popular at the social gatherings of the young pioneer folk, have survived. In one of the lesser known of these games the boys and girls would circle around singing a song. At the end of each verse each boy would grab a girl from the circle and try to kiss her. The song was as follows:

"Oh sister Mary how happy we'd be
The juniper tree, heigho! heigho! warm.
Take my hat off it will keep your head/ Take a sweet kiss, it will do you no harm.
The juniper tree, heigho! heigho!"

The Fourth of July. The big event of the year was the Fourth of July celebration. Farmers came to town, wagons loaded with their families and all the food they could haul. One pioneer recalls his mother baking two hundred gooseberry pies for a Fourth of July dinner.

There was usually a parade in the morning, the feature of which was the Liberty float. Instead of princesses or a queen, Columbia or the Goddess of Liberty presided over the float. She was supposed to be the prettiest girl in the country, preferably one with fair or golden hair. Dressed in a flowing white robe and usually seated on a pedestal, she would ride on a bunting decorated hay rack, the Liberty float. Seated around the edge were little girls, also dressed in white, who represented the states of the Union. The small girl was always Rhode Island.

At noon families feasted upon a dinner spread in some convenient grove or vacant lot. In the afternoon, the Fourth of July program was given. This usually consisted of the reading of the Declaration of Independence, followed by an oration which freely lauded "the land of the free and the home of the brave."

Bundlo Peddlers. After trade had been established with the east an exciting event was the visit of the bundle peddler. He came to the homes, offering for sale bundles of materials which were bought at a set price. Some of the bundles sold for as high as $150.00. They contained many wonderful things not usually seen in Oregon, such as fancy shawls, printed goods, silks and other luxuries. It was a great day indeed, especially for the young girls, when a family bought a bundle.

Godsey's Lady's Book. It is recalled that the first magazines seen in Oregon were issues of Godsey's Lady's Book, Peterson's, and the Bazaar (probably Harper's). Later there was the Delineator.
One pioneer, seeing the covers of the old Godey's magazine selling years later in Paris for a large sum, was amazed. She was also astonished to see framed illustrations from the old magazine now being used as pictures on the walls of well-to-do homes. "All they meant to us in those days," she said, "was that the Oregon stores were two years behind with the styles."

Family Tourist Coach. After railroad connections had been established between the east and California, many of the immigrants in the 1880's came "across the plains" in family tourist coaches. Although many of the hardships relative to crossing the plains by ox-team were eliminated and the time shortened by many weeks traveling family tourist style was not without its trials. It is not known exactly how many families traveled in a tourist coach but one pioneer who came to Oregon, via California, says there were sixteen children in a single coach.

Each family carried its own bedding, including mattresses, which were usually ticking filled with straw that could be thrown away at the end of the journey. They also carried their own food, which was cooked on a stove at one end of the car. The women carried brooms with which to sweep out the car.

The train traveled very slowly, especially going up hill. One train moved so slowly that a man whose hat blew off as the train moved westward was able to get off the train, catch his hat, and board the train again.

Eastern Merchants. One pioneer believes that historians have neglected to give eastern merchants credit due them for their part in building the great west. These easterners, many of whom never set foot in the west, staked adventurous young men to stocks of goods with which to set up business in a new country. Many western fortunes were founded upon such ventures.

The Dances of the Gay 80's and 90's. Standard dances in the 80's and 90's were the schottische, the minuet, the polka, the Virginia reel, and the popular quadrille. There were almost as many variations of the quadrille as there were callers to call and dancers to dance them. The quadrille usually consisted of five figures, movements or changes, executed by four couples. Each couple occupied one side of a square, a practice that gave rise to the name by which this dance is usually called "the square dance." There were as many sets on the floor at one time as the size of the room would accommodate.

Music was furnished by the best available neighborhood fiddler assisted by another neighbor who without knowledge of written notes, could "shord" on the melody. Correct time was maintained by the fiddler thumping his boot on the hard floor, the gyrations of his shoulder as he scraped his fiddle, and the vigorous nodding of his head.

The fiddler and the dance caller were colorful individuals, who, if they excelled in their abilities, were not without repute and importance in their neighborhood. A clever fiddler knew how to draw attention to himself by a bit of clowning as he fiddled. Some fiddlers would toss their fiddles into the air or flip them upside down without losing a beat. Others, just to prove their complete mastery of the instrument, made a specialty of waving their fiddles backward over their heads while playing.

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