

Introduction to Oregon Trail History

The Oregon Trail: Transformation from of an epic route into the Grande Ronde Valley to an Oasis for Wildlife

Written by Jim Akenson, FOLM historian, 2015

Ladd Marsh is located on the southwest side of the Grande Ronde Valley in Northeastern Oregon. The valley name means “great circle.” It was the place most admired by early pioneer travelers going through the Blue Mountains. It was not only a welcome green oasis, or place of great beauty, but was rendered even more striking by the suddenness with which they first beheld it while descending Ladd Hill. Known to local Indians as “Cop-Copi”, named for the large cottonwoods that grew there, it was given its French name, Grande Ronde, by Hudson’s Bay Company men (trappers) during the 1820’s.

Hot Lake, Union County, Oregon

This steaming mineral lake 10 miles east of La Grande was probably first visited by the white men when Robert Stuart and the returning “Astorians” passed there on August 7, 1812. Washington Irving describes it in these words: “in traversing this Grande Ronde plain, they passed close to the skirts of the hilts a great pool of water three hundred yards in circumference fed by a sulphur spring, about 200 feet in diameter, boiling up in one corner. The vapor from this pool was extremely noisome, and tainted the air for a considerable distance. The place was much frequented by elk, which were found in considerable numbers in the adjacent mountains, and their horns, shed in the springtime, were strewed in every direction around the pond.”

When the wagon trains first came into the Grande Ronde Valley all of that part from Hot Lake to what is now the town of Union was a lake of water until late in the summer. Here was a favorite resting place for birds of many kinds. Sandhill cranes, wild geese and wild ducks were there in numbers almost unimaginable today. Many of the early settlers supplied themselves with flocks of wild geese to furnish the soft downy feathers for bedding. When the time of year came for the wild geese to move south, those that had been captured wanted to go with the annual migration. To prevent this, one wing was taken off each bird at the first joint, and they were then unable to fly.

Early History – Crossing Ladd Marsh with Wagons

Quotes: From Powerful Rockey – The Blue Mountains and the Oregon Trail, 1811-1883. by John W. Evans. 1991.

Robert Stuart, 1812: *“After resting and repairing their equipment, they broke camp on August 7 and crossed the southeast corner of the valley. They had to keep to the foothills as much of the valley was marshland. Stuart describes Hot Lake as a sulphur lake 300 yards in circumference fed by a boiling spring in its southeast corner and producing a very strong odor. He notes that it must be much frequented by elk during the spring as they have shed large numbers of antlers there. As expected (as a trapping brigade leader), he takes special notice of fur-bearing animals in this area: raccoon, beaver, and river otter.”*

Narcissa Whitman, 1836: *“Grand Round is indeed a beautiful place. It is a circular plain, surrounded with lofty mountains and has a beautiful stream coursing through it, skirted with timber – and quite large timber. The scenery while passing through it is delightful & the soil rich, in other places we find the white sand and sage as usual, so peculiar to this country. We nooned upon the Grand Round River.”*

“The Cammas grows in abundance & it is the principal resort (food resource) of the Cayouses & many other tribes to obtain of it, of which they are very fond. It resembles an onion in shape and colour, when cooked it is very sweet and tastes like a fig. Their manner of cooking them is very curious. They dig a hole in the ground, throw in a heap of stones, heat them to a red heat, cover them with green grass, upon which they put the cammas & cover the whole with earth, when taken out it is black. This is the chief food of many tribes during winter.”

“The morning Mr. McLeod remained behind (at or near present Ladd Marsh) in pursuit of game, and did not come into camp until we had made a long nooning (waiting for him). Began to feel a little concerned & it was proposed to send back in pursuit of him when, at about 3 pm he came into camp loaded with wild ducks having taken twenty-two. Here also Richard caught a fresh salmon which made us another good meal & if we had been out of provisions we could have made a dinner upon fresh water clams for the river (Grande Ronde) was full of them where we nooned.”

Major Osborne Cross, 1849 (first military unit to travel the entire Oregon trail – supported by 700 horses, 1,200 mules, a lot of oxen, and 171 wagons). *“We descended a mountain for a mile and a half which brought us to the Grande Ronde. At the base of the mountain we crossed a small brook (Ladd Creek) which came from the deep gorge to our left (Ladd Canyon). Water issues from the base of the mountains which completely surround the valley. It is, for a settlement, the prettiest place I have passed on the route. The only objection that can be made to this section is the difficulty in getting produce to the Columbia River. This could be easily remedied, and the day is not far distant, no doubt, when a railroad will overcome these objections. The distance here and The Dalles is about 200 miles and there is enough timber to here and there to build a railroad to the Atlantic Ocean.”* Cross was correct, but the railroad did not span the Grande Ronde Valley – cutting across Ladd Marsh until 1884, 35 years later.

John Strachan, 1860*: *“Grande Ronde Valley is about eighteen miles long and fifteen miles wide. It is the place where several Indian tribes meet to trade, such as the Cayuse, Nez Perce, and the Walla Walla Indians meet the Snakes or Shoshones to trade salmon and horses for roots, skins, and elk and buffalo meat. This is decidedly the country for horses in numbers and variety of colors. One chief is said to have more than a thousand horses on these feed grounds”*

* In a footnote, John W. Evans states that year-round settlement of the Grande Ronde Valley did not start until the next year (1861) and that prior to that the principle white occupants were former employees of the Hudson’s Bay Company.

However, there are records indicating that at least one supply fort was present in the Grande Ronde Valley immediately prior to permanent settlement. The one most noted was located somewhere near the convergence of present-day Foothill Road and I-84. The fort was started by a man named Green Arnold and reportedly operated for 7 years from 1854 to 1861.

Settlement Period to Early Wildlife Management

From the late 1880’s until the drought period of the 1930’s extensive wetland draining and stream re-channelization efforts dramatically altered wildlife use of the area now known as the Ladd Marsh Wildlife Area. It was estimated that the original Tule Lake in the south end of the Grande Ronde Valley was 20,000 acres. By 1948 the original lake had been reduced to just 400 acres. Generally, agency records are scant during this time period, however, Jerry Gildemeister was contracted by ODFW to conduct oral interviews of old-timers starting in 1989 who had

recollections of fish and wildlife situations during the 1920's, 30's, and 40's. Here are some pertinent quotes:

Arlen Chenault/Lloyd Crossland, *“There were not many ducks in the Grande Ronde Valley in the ‘teens and 20’s. However, after Thief Valley dam was built in 1929 there were large flocks feeding in the valley. During the 1940’s it was prime duck hunting around Hot Lake when they flooded the Davis Ranch. The bag limit was ten ducks at that time and it was no trouble getting a limit without decoys.”*

Bert Wardell, *“Waterfowl populations started declining in the 1960’s after the USDA Soil Conservation Service drained the land adjacent Hot Lake for farming. Also, there were other losses of wetlands and losses of food supplies with a lot of the valley now in grass, and a change in the flyway with waterfowl shifting to the Boardman area.”*

Will H. Brown, *“Prior to 1949, and the start of the Ladd Marsh Project, it was rare to see geese nest in the Grande Ronde Valley. Then, after 1949, nesting boxes were placed on poles in the water and the geese started to use them. Juveniles returned to nest and started increasing the population, since female geese always return to their birthplace.”*

Recent History, Major Events, and Land Acquisitions

1949 – Establishment of Ladd Marsh Wildlife Area. The initial objective was to protect and improve waterfowl habitat and provide a public hunting area.

W.H. Brown, “The Ladd Marsh project started in 1949. Initially 200 acres were purchased but politics stopped the project, and it was delayed for a time until the Game Commission’s Northeast Region could reactivate it.”

1949/50 – Combined Counsell and Grandy properties purchased (80 and 120 acres respectively) for the original land acquisition with Pittman Robertson funding.

1959 – Boothman property addition (800 acres).

1964/65 – Nine additional properties and 2 water rights added. (937.2 acres)

1970’s – Pheasant rearing, many improvements made for improving waterfowl nesting habitat.

1985 – Now provides habitat for an average fall-winter-spring population of 75,000 waterfowl.

1989 – LMWA totals 2,828 acres of wetland and converted wetland in state ownership.

1992 – Purchase of the Rinke property (381 acres) brings the total to over 3,200 acres.

2000 – Smutz, Glass Hill, property purchased by Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF).

2006 – LMWA achieved its current size of 6,019 acres.

2008 – RMEF, Glass Hill, property transferred to ODFW.

2011 – Friends of Ladd Marsh Board established, officially registered as a 501 C3 in 2013

2014 – 65 years of wetland conservation effort!

2015 – 10th Anniversary of the Ladd Marsh Bird Festival, formerly the Birdathon.