

Stories on the Land

Excerpt 4

Below is another excerpt from the unpublished 1996 book, Stories on the Land: An Environmental History of the Applegate and Upper Illinois Valley, by George McKinley and Doug Frank. The previous excerpt told about the Hudson's Bay Company. Here we meet Applegate and Josephine.

Applegate's River and the county called Josephine

The arrival of missionaries from the United States in the 1830s started turning the tide of British imperial power in the Pacific Northwest. However, more than missionaries endeavoring to "Christianize the frontier" was required to "Americanize Oregon." This task required settlers, and many of them.

Among these "Americanizers" were Jesse and Lindsay Applegate and their families, who had traveled across the Oregon Trail in 1843 in a wagon train of 875 settlers, 295 of whom were men over sixteen years of age.

But this trail was unsatisfactory for wagon trains and settlers with families for a couple of reasons. First, it was a rugged trapper and trader route, following a string of Hudson's Bay Company forts and requiring a float down the Columbia. Both Jesse and Lindsay had lost ten-year-old sons to a river crossing near the Dalles during their 1843 journey. The second reason was the political climate. Great Britain and the United States were at odds over the border between their jurisdictions. With the Hudson's Bay Company in control of the only land routes into Oregon and in league with many of the Native Americans along the way, a safer passage seemed prudent.

In 1846, the Applegate brothers, along with Levi Scott, became trailblazers of a new route. They left the Willamette Valley in June for Fort Hall, Idaho. By the end of July, they had passed through the Rogue Valley. They followed the standard Siskiyou Trail into Bear Creek and, heeding the advice of a group of mixed-race French-Canadian and native trappers, headed east over the southern flank of the Cascades up the Emigrant Creek drainage. From there, they made their way through present-day Greensprings country into the Klamath Basin and over the dry Great Basin country to Fort Hall.

By late August, the first settlers were traveling west across the Applegate Trail, called at the time the Southern Oregon Emigrant Road.

The impact of the new trail upon the Applegate and surrounding areas was minimal in its first few years. Settlers used the trail chiefly to pass through the region, not to stay, partly because the Rogue region displayed no infrastructure to support immigration—no settlements, agriculture, discovered resources, or market for goods—and partly because of the continued presence of a hostile native population.

In 1848, Lindsay Applegate was again passing through the area, heading for the newly-discovered gold fields in California. From a divide above the Rogue River near present-day Grants Pass, he saw what someone in his party said was a bend of the Rogue. Applegate claimed it was another stream altogether. His comrades referred to it jestingly as "Applegate's River."

Time has dignified the appellation

The same promise of California gold that attracted Lindsay Applegate drew a stream of men from the Willamette Valley through the Rogue Valley, leaving the fur era to history. Historian Terence O'Donnell estimates that two-thirds of "the able-bodied men of Oregon" headed to the California fields, most traveling the Siskiyou Trail through southwest Oregon.

Virginia Josephine Rollins was among "the able-bodied men of Oregon" who headed south. She and her father, Lloyd Rollins, left Missouri in 1850 for the California gold fields. They arrived at the Humboldt desert of Nevada with weakened ox teams and decided to head for Oregon instead.

They wintered in Oregon City and headed for California the next spring. At the Rogue River, some natives informed them of rich mines a few days' travel down the river. Some of the party continued to California while the rest stopped to explore the mines with the help of some friendly Indian guides. They discovered "good surface mining there on what was supposed to be Illinois Creek."

Unfortunately, a group of Native Americans launched an attack on them, necessitating rescue by a mounted company of volunteers from the area of present-day Yreka. When the volunteers headed home, the Rollins company followed along. In a letter of 1909 Josephine Rollins wrote, "I was the only woman in the entire company. It must be remembered there were no roads, towns or counties there in these early times, and I was the first white woman in that section of Oregon." Josephine Creek, one of the first gold-mining areas in southern Oregon, was named for her as was, of course, Josephine County.

Note: Excerpted by Diana Coogle from pages 21 - 22 of Stories on the Land.