

Discover

Stories on the Land

Excerpt 8

Below is another excerpt (from pages 39 - 41) from the unpublished 1996 book, Stories on the Land: An Environmental History of the Applegate and Upper Illinois Valley, by George McKinley and Doug Frank.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 Applegate Valley Community Newspaper, Inc, plans to publish the book in its entirety in 2020.

New managers displace the old: The Rogue Indian Wars

The waves of human immigration and explosions of mining and agricultural activity on a landscape now named southern Oregon overlaid a management system, not to mention a way of life, already in place. “Indians lived well in the valley,” Black and Black remind us in *Ruch and the Upper Applegate Valley*. “They left with reluctance.”

The early records reflect the toll that the reluctance of the natives took on the miners and farmers. Many who filed on or inhabited the DLCs [Donation Land Claims] between 1852 and 1855 met their end at the hands of the natives. A heightened level of fear underscored the celebrations of Indian annihilation that mark the period. At a party attended by over a hundred people, held at Table Rock on July 25, 1852, in honor of a murderous Indian campaign in the Rogue Valley, J.W. Davenport offered a toast:

In behalf of those who contributed to this dinner—May your generous acts on this occasion be honored throughout this Valley; may their emblematic influence excite the independence of our Union; and may you live to see the time when the Indians of Rogue River are extinct.

This toast brought together in a single vision the newly claimed lands of southwest Oregon, the “manifest destiny” of the white race to rule the continent, and the extinction of the natives.

Shortly afterward, the renowned Indian fighter Ben Wright paraded through Yreka with scalps and mementoes taken from the human beings living in a peaceful Modoc village as they prepared for winter. Yreka celebrated with a seven-day binge.

Such events are often included in the retelling of the Rogue River Indian Wars, the name assigned to the loosely connected and wide-ranging hostilities of the 1852-1856 era. These hostilities find their place in our narrative as a struggle for succession: a new land-management regime making its bid to succeed the old. The old regime understood that to lose the power to implement its own understanding of land management was to lose its way of life, even to lose life itself. The new regime understood that its own understanding of land management would not be consolidated until the ground was swept clean of its predecessors.

In his *History of Southern Oregon* (1884), A.G. Walling echoes the view that conflict with the natives was holding up progress. He regrets that the Rogue Valley didn't sooner experience the good fortune of the Willamette, which was soon “devoid of disaffected aborigines,” and that a two-year lull in hostilities was punctured by the skirmishes of 1853, when “mining operations” and “general improvements” came to a virtual standstill. Donation Land Claims were abandoned, and isolated farmhouses became fortified and called

Fort Briggs, Fort Hays, etc. However, progress “revived immediately upon the conclusion of peace, and quickly assumed a more permanent character than at any previous time.” A similar dampening of activity in the region occurs in late 1855 and 1856, during hostilities leading up to the removal of the natives. Again, in the face of only minor loss of life among the settlers, mining operations ceased, fields were left untended, and mobility was restricted. But after the removal of the natives, progress returned with a vengeance, as if to atone for the season of enforced idleness.

Walling tied the above few seasons of lost progress to a national tale. He considered the Rogue Wars no different from other wars which raged across the western landscape, “where the blood of the early settlers was poured out in vindication of the grand principle of Caucasian progressiveness. For the white and the red races are equally uncomfortable to each other's habits of life and meet only to repeat the old story of white conquest and native subjugation.”

The removal of the natives from southwest Oregon opened the way for the newcomers to consolidate their own plans for the region. For the natives, however, removal was the final blow in their short but devastating encounter with American settlers. A lifestyle intact and in place for millennia was destroyed in the space of decades from first contact.

The Rogue River Indian Wars consolidated a new regime in power and dismantled the old, banishing it to the dispiritedness that accompanies genocide.

Excerpted by Diana Coogle.