

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE UMATILLA NATIONAL FOREST<sup>1</sup>

Compiled By David C. Powell

June 2008

## 1804-1806

- The Lewis and Clark Expedition ventured close to the north and west sides of the Umatilla National Forest as they traveled along the Snake and Columbia rivers.
- As the Lewis & Clark party drew closer to the Walla Walla River on their return trip in 1806, their journal entries note the absence of firewood, Indian use of shrubs for fuel, abundant roots for human consumption, and good availability of grass for horses. Writing some distance up the Walla Walla River, William Clark noted that “great portions of these bottoms has been latterly burnt which has entirely destroyed the timbered growth” (Robbins 1997).

## 1810-1840

- This 3-decade period was a period of exploration and use by trappers, missionaries, naturalists, and government scientists or explorers.
- William Price Hunt (fur trader), John Kirk Townsend (naturalist), Peter Skene Ogden (trapper and guide), Thomas Nuttall (botanist), Reverend Samuel Parker (missionary), Marcus and Narcissa Whitman (missionaries), Henry and Eliza Spaulding (missionaries), Captain Benjamin Bonneville (military explorer), Captain John Charles Fremont (military scientist), Nathaniel J. Wyeth (fur trader), and Jason Lee (missionary) are just a few of the people who visited and described the Blue Mountains during this era.



## 1840-1859

- During the 1840s and 1850s – the Oregon Trail era – much overland migration occurred as settlers passed through the Blue Mountains on their way to the Willamette Valley (the Oregon Trail continued to receive fairly heavy use until well into the late 1870s). The Oregon Trail traversed the Umatilla National Forest.
- In 1847, Cayuse Indians attacked the Whitman Mission, which had been established in 1838 near the present location of Walla Walla, and this attack unleashed a war between American Indians and Euro-American emigrants in the Columbia River basin.
- In August of 1848, at least partly in response to the Cayuse War, the U.S. Congress created a very large Oregon Territory (containing at least three existing states).

- In 1853, the Washington Territory was split off from the larger Oregon Territory, followed by the Idaho Territory in 1863.
- In June of 1855, treaties were ratified with the Walla Walla, Cayuse, Umatilla, Yakima, and Nez Perce tribes. The Umatilla National Forest contains ceded lands from all of these tribes. [Ceded lands have reserved Indian rights for fishing, hunting, gathering roots and other traditional foodstuffs, and pasturing of livestock.]
- In the mid 1850s, a large forest fire (about 88,000 acres) came from the present Umatilla Indian Reservation, burned up the Umatilla River, into the Wenaha Forest Reserve, then turned north along the west slope across the heads of the Walla Wallas, and reached as far as the head of the Wenaha River.

### **1860s**

- The 1860s was a primary settlement period for much of the Umatilla National Forest because Oregon Trail emigrants (see the 1840-1859 section) were passing through on their way to western Oregon, so little Blue Mountains settlement occurred then.
- In the early 1860s, gold was discovered in the Blue Mountains, eventually leading to hydraulic dredge mining on the southern part of the Umatilla National Forest. Early gold finds were primarily surface deposits and these placer lodes were seldom sustained long.
- In the fall of 1863, an Oregon farmer sowed 50 acres of wheat on non-irrigated uplands near Weston, and eventually harvested 35 bushels per acre by late in the following summer. Wheat farming, which was highly dependent on human and animal labor, quickly had a major impact on livestock numbers because many draft horses were needed to pull wheat plowing and harvesting equipment.
- Passage of the 1862 Homestead Act established a process for emigrants to obtain up to 160 acres of public lands for free, providing they paid a modest filing fee and met the terms of proof (built a dwelling, proved agricultural viability, etc.). The Umatilla National Forest included many homestead claims.
- In 1867, a General Land Office was established in La Grande to initiate public land surveys in the Blue Mountains, and to process homestead applications.

### **1870s**

- The General Land Office surveyed lands within the Umatilla National Forest between 1863 and the mid 1930s, but most of the Forest was initially surveyed between 1879 and 1887.

### **1880s**

- The Oregon Short Line Railroad was built in the mid 1880s in a southeasterly direction from Wallula, Washington to Huntington, Oregon, where it connected with Union Pacific's main line. This was the first major railroad line to traverse the Blue Mountains, and it became an important transportation corridor for the Umatilla National Forest.

### **1890s**

- During the 1890s, sheep grazing on the Umatilla National Forest began escalating to very high numbers, with much of the wool being used by the Pendleton Woolen Mills to manufacture a wide range of wool blankets and other articles.
- Large roving bands of sheep on the open range (non-reserved public domain lands) led to range wars between cattle and sheep operators, with bloodshed occurring in some areas.

## 1900s

- Between 1904 and 1907, many public domain lands were formally withdrawn as Forest Reserves for the Blue Mountains region: Wenaha (northern Umatilla NF) in 1905; Heppner and Blue Mountains (southern Umatilla NF) in 1906.
  - The forest reserves were intended to conserve the area's water supply for farmers, reduce conflict between stockmen, and to protect timberlands and summer rangelands from "destruction and wasteful use."
  - In 1905, just prior to establishment of the Wenaha Forest Reserve, the northern half of the Umatilla National Forest supported somewhere in excess of 275,000 head of grown sheep plus their increase, 40,000 head of cattle, and 15,000 head of horses. All these animals grazed annually on what is now the Pomeroy and Walla Walla Ranger Districts. [Compiler's note, for historical context: by the late 1930s, permitted livestock numbers for the entire Umatilla National Forest, comprising an area about double the size of the Wenaha Reserve, had been reduced to 88,102 head of sheep and 8,528 head of cattle.]
  - 1905 was considered to represent a low point for big-game animals (elk and deer) on the Umatilla National Forest. After the Forest was established in 1908, wild game increased steadily: 1938 estimates put the populations at about 10,000 deer and 7,000 elk.
  - In 1906, the open-range wars ended when the U.S. Forest Service began regulating use of summer range by allotting separate areas of the forest reserves to cattle and sheep (and by not allowing the two stock classes to intermingle on the same range).
  - In 1907, Representative Charles Fulton of Oregon introduced an amendment in the U.S. Congress to prohibit further Forest Reserve withdrawals in the Pacific Northwest. Before this law went into effect, President Theodore Roosevelt created his famous "midnight reserves" by setting aside 16 million acres, including the Blue Mountains, Colville, and Imnaha forest reserves.
  - In 1908, the Heppner, Umatilla, Wenaha, and Whitman national forests were established by Presidential executive order (all of these forests contained lands now included within the Umatilla National Forest boundary).
- Umatilla National Forest established by proclamation on June 13, 1908.**

## 1910s

- As was the case for much of the western United States, the Umatilla National Forest experienced very high levels of forest fire activity in 1910 – more than 97,000 acres burned, a greater acreage than was recorded for any other year in the Forest's history.
- In the second half of the 1910s, a large outbreak of mountain pine beetle occurred across the Blue Mountains; the first insect-control project in the country occurred in 1910 when \$5,000 was diverted from the nation's firefighting account to combat beetle damage in northeastern Oregon. [Compiler's editorial comment: now days, funds are often diverted from other accounts to cover firefighting costs.]
- In 1915, a Forest Supervisor's office for the Umatilla National Forest was established at Pendleton in the Post Office building, having been moved there from Heppner.
- Elk were transplanted to the Wenaha National Forest and the northern Blue Mountains in February 1913 (Pomeroy area), March 1913 (Walla Walla area), winter of 1918 (Blue Mountains near Walla Walla), and January 1930 (south of Dayton, WA). The source of these transplanted elk was Montana.

## 1920s

- In November 1920, the Wenaha National Forest (containing lands now administered by the Pomeroy and Walla Walla Ranger Districts) was combined with the Umatilla National Forest to the south, and the combined unit was called the Umatilla National Forest.

## 1930s

- In 1935, U.S. Highway 395 was completed as a paved road. This highway is a major north-south transportation corridor for the southern half of the Umatilla National Forest, and for the remainder of the central and southern Blue Mountains.
- Late in 1937, the Camas Creek timber sale was awarded to the Milton Box Company of Milton, Oregon. This was the largest timber sale ever awarded on the Umatilla National Forest: 221.3 million board feet.
- Throughout the 1930s, much work was accomplished on the Umatilla National Forest by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), a “New Deal” initiative instituted during the Great Depression by the Franklin D. Roosevelt presidential administration. Fire fighting, trail construction, recreation site development, tree planting, building construction, range improvements, precommercial thinning, and a variety of other work was accomplished by the CCC. The Umatilla National Forest had CCC camps at Ukiah, Bingham Springs (on the Umatilla River), Wilson Prairie (Heppner), near Pomeroy, and at several other locations. The 4-mile road from Tollgate to Target Meadows, where soldiers from Fort Walla Walla went each summer for gunnery practice, was completed by CCC crews.
- In the late 1930s, the Blue Mountain Ski Club continued developing a winter sports playground called the Lookingglass Creek bowl near Tollgate. Ski lift planning commenced in August of 1938 for what would eventually become the Spout Springs ski area.



## 1940s

- The Harris Pine Mills timber processing plant opened in Pendleton in May of 1940. Much of the timber removed from the Camas Creek timber sale area (located on the North Fork John Day Ranger District) was processed into wood products (fruit shipping boxes, furniture, lumber, etc.) by the Harris Pine Company.
- Beginning in the early 1940s, national forest tree harvests increased to meet a heightened demand for wood products during World War II, and to provide raw materials for new housing after the war. Annual harvest levels reached 39 million board feet on the Umatilla National Forest in 1944 (cut volume).

- What is now the Tollgate Work Center opened as a Ranger District office in late summer or fall of 1941, just before District Ranger Albert Baker retired in December of 1941. During this era, Walla Walla was an “in-and-out” district because it had two offices: one at Walla Walla as the winter headquarters, and another at Tollgate as the summer office.
- From 1944 to 1958, a huge outbreak of western spruce budworm affected the entire Blue Mountains, with almost 900,000 acres of the Umatilla National Forest affected in 1950.
- From 1945 to 1947, a localized outbreak of Douglas-fir tussock moth occurred on the northern Umatilla National Forest near Troy, Oregon; 14,000 acres of the infested area were sprayed with an insecticide called DDT in June of 1947.

### **1950s**

- Spray projects were completed on portions of the Umatilla National Forest in 1950, 1951, 1952, 1953, 1955, and 1958. During these projects, an insecticide called DDT was applied from aircraft to suppress western spruce budworm populations.
- Timber harvesting on Blue Mountains national forests began in earnest in the mid 1950s, when most sales were partial cuts where only the most valuable trees were removed. On the Umatilla National Forest, annual timber harvest levels reached 89 million board feet by 1959 (cut volume).
- On September 17, 1950, a ceremony was held at Big Saddle, near Table Rock lookout, to dedicate the Kendall Skyline Road. This road was named in honor of William H. Kendall, an early District Ranger (prior to 1920) who was instrumental in the road’s conception and development. Although private funds built the first few miles of this road during World War I, federal funds ultimately constructed most of it, including countless hours by CCC work crews during the mid 1930s. At one point, the Walla Walla CCC camp included 216 young men, many of whom spent time on road projects such as the Kendall Skyline Road.

### **1960s**

- By the mid 1960s, small timber sales were made on the north end of the Umatilla National Forest (Abels Ridge and other areas on Pomeroy RD; Swamp Creek and other areas on Walla Walla RD). These early clearcuts now support vigorous, second-growth stands of mixed conifers, and many of them have been thinned several times since the 1970s.
- In 1968, two research natural areas were designated on the Umatilla National Forest, both of which are located on the Pomeroy Ranger District: Pataha Bunchgrass RNA in Garfield County, and Rainbow Creek RNA in Columbia County.
- In the late 1960s, a 55-foot-tall dam (about 350 feet long) was developed along Mottet Creek to create Jubilee Lake on the Walla Walla Ranger District. The lake was dedicated on June 1, 1968. The lake area had long been considered for an impoundment; the first US Forest Service site survey occurred in the 1930s. Like Bull Prairie Lake on the Heppner RD, Jubilee Lake development was financed by the Oregon Game Commission using funds generated from fishing license fees. Jubilee Lake covers about 100 acres (second only in size to Olive Lake on the Umatilla NF), and it is a major recreation attraction.



## 1970s

- Between 1972 and 1974, the northern Blue Mountains experienced the largest outbreak of Douglas-fir tussock moth ever recorded anywhere in North America.
- The Forest Service eventually convinced the Environmental Protection Agency to temporarily suspend their 1972 ban of DDT so it could be used against tussock moth; more than 426,000 acres were sprayed with DDT in a tri-State area in 1974, with only 32,700 of the sprayed acres located on the Umatilla National Forest.
- In the mid and late 1970s, many salvage timber sales were completed to remove trees killed or damaged by Douglas-fir tussock moth defoliation. About 137 million board feet of timber was salvaged from tussock-moth areas on the Pendleton Ranger District alone.
- In the mid 1970s, a very large mountain pine beetle outbreak occurred in lodgepole pine forests throughout the central and southern portions of the Blue Mountains – more than 375,000 acres of the Umatilla National Forest were affected in 1976.
- In 1972, four management treatments were installed at the High Ridge Barometer Watershed – large clearcuts, small clearcuts, selective cutting, and an untreated (control) area. The High Ridge study was initially established in October of 1967 to document weather conditions for a high-elevation watershed, and to monitor water flow and sediment production changes associated with timber production practices.
- In the early 1970s, the upper portion of the Tiger Creek (Tiger Canyon) road was developed, with initial work commencing in July of 1971. This is a major recreational road and access point to the Umatilla National Forest for residents of Walla Walla, Washington.
- The Wenaha-Tucannon Wilderness was created by passage of the Endangered American Wilderness Act of 1978.

## 1980s

- On January 15, 1980, nearly 2,000 skiers flocked to the opening of the Bluewood Ski Area located 23 miles south of Dayton, Washington.
- In October of 1980, the Woodland Sno-Park site, located about 2 miles south of the Spout Springs ski area and adjacent to Oregon Highway 204, was completed and opened. Like other snow parks, this project was developed cooperatively by a state's Department of Transportation, Boise Cascade Corporation, and a local snowmobile club.
- From the late 1970s to the late 1980s, very high levels of timber harvesting occurred on Blue Mountain national forests. On the Umatilla National Forest, annual harvest levels reached 222 million board feet in 1973, and 227 million board feet in 1989 (cut volume).

- Beginning in 1980 and continuing until 1992, a large outbreak of western spruce budworm affected the Umatilla National Forest (and the remainder of the Blue Mountains). Several suppression (spray) projects occurred during this outbreak, when either chemical or biological control agents were applied from aircraft.
- In 1984, two new Wilderness areas were designated on the Umatilla National Forest: North Fork John Day Wilderness (located on the North Fork John Day Ranger District), and the North Fork Umatilla Wilderness (located on the Walla Walla Ranger District).
- In the early 1980s, the Umatilla National Forest installed the Data General computer system. This “DG system” represented the first agency-wide implementation of standardized technology throughout all levels and offices of the U.S. Forest Service.



### 1990s

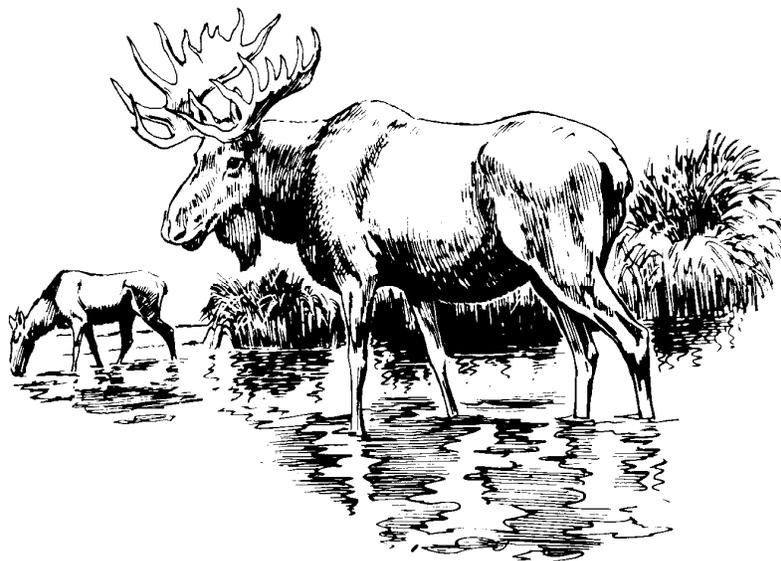
- In 1990, the first comprehensive Land and Resource Management Plan was approved for the Umatilla National Forest. It replaced a group of so-called “unit plans,” all of which were prepared and approved in the 1970s, covering smaller portions of the Forest. The 1990 Forest Plan established management direction for a 10-year implementation period (at most 15 years), but it is still in place today.
- In April 1991, the Blue Mountains Forest Health Report was released. This report described deteriorating forest health conditions on the Umatilla National Forest (and the remainder of the Blue Mountains).
- Between 1992 and 1994, several broad-scale reports pertaining to the Umatilla National Forest were released. The Caraher Report was issued in July 1992. A draft version of the Everett Report was released in April 1993, with the final report produced in 1994. The Eastside Forests Scientific Society Panel report was published in August 1994.
- The Eastside Screens were issued in August 1993 in response to a petition and threatened lawsuit from the Natural Resources Defense Council. The Screens established interim direction that all timber sale projects are required to meet. Following a lawsuit filed by Prairie Wood Products, the Eastside Screens were required to meet NEPA requirements by amending the Umatilla Forest Plan. The Screens are still in force today.
- In March 1994, interim strategies for managing anadromous fish-producing watersheds in eastern Oregon and Washington, Idaho, and portions of California (PACFISH) were is-

sued. This interim direction is geared toward restoration of aquatic habitat and riparian areas on lands administered by the Forest Service and BLM; PACFISH is still in force today.

- On January 21, 1994, the Chief of the Forest Service and the Director of the USDI Bureau of Land Management signed a charter establishing the Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project (ICBEMP). This project resulted in broad- and mid-scale scientific assessments covering more than 144 million acres (76 million of which are federal) in seven western states. Although the environmental impact statement that would have amended the Umatilla Forest Plan was never completed, the ICBEMP effort still produced a wealth of scientific information that continues to influence management of the Umatilla National Forest today.
- In 1996, a large amount of wildfire activity occurred on the southern half of the Umatilla National Forest, with the Wheeler Point (Heppner RD), Tower, Bull, and Summit (North Fork John Day RD) fires affecting more than 72,000 acres of national forest lands.
- During the 1990s, timber harvest levels declined dramatically; recent timber harvest levels for the Umatilla National Forest (from the mid 1990s to the present) are the lowest they have been since the mid 1950s.

## 2000s

- Late in the 1990s, a long-term nemesis of the Umatilla National Forest – Douglas-fir tussock moth – once again reached outbreak status, and more than 39,000 acres were sprayed with a natural virus in June and July of 2000 to minimize defoliation damage.
- In the mid 2000s, several very large forest fires occurred on the Umatilla National Forest, with the School Fire burning about 28,000 acres of National Forest System lands in 2005 (Pomeroy Ranger District), the Columbia Complex Fire affecting about 50,000 acres in 2006 (Pomeroy and Walla Walla Ranger Districts), and the Monument Complex Fire covering about 19,800 acres (Heppner Ranger District).
- In the late 2000s, moose numbers on the Umatilla National Forest increased to the point where they were no longer considered a transient animal, and it is now assumed that a resident population has gotten established.



## Sources

- [Author unknown]. 1975.** Walla Walla Treaty of 1855. Confederated Umatilla Journal. 5-7.
- East Oregonian. 1972.** Detailed study being made of Blue Mountain water production. East Oregonian; September 19.
- Evans, J.W. 1990.** Powerful rocky: the Blue Mountains and the Oregon Trail, 1811-1883. Enterprise, OR: Eastern Oregon State College, Pika Press. 374 p.
- Ewing, Carl. 1939 (November 21).** Memorandum: historical information about the Umatilla National Forest. Unpublished Report. Pendleton, OR: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Region, Umatilla National Forest. 6 p.  
<http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/uma/publications/history/Umatilla21.pdf>
- Fowler, W.B.; Helvey, J.D.; Johnson, C. 1979.** Baseline climatic and hydrologic relationships for the High Ridge evaluation area. General Technical Report PNW-91. Portland, OR: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Forest and Range Experiment Station. 17 p.
- Powell, D.C. 2008.** Blue Mountain national forests: a chronological record of selected boundary proclamations. Pendleton, OR: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Umatilla National Forest. 4 p.  
<http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/uma/publications/history/bm%20national%20forests%20chronology.pdf>
- Powell, D.C. 2008.** Douglas-fir tussock moth in the Blue Mountains. Pendleton, OR: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Umatilla National Forest. 7 p.  
<http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/uma/publications/history/tussock%20moth%20story.pdf>
- Powell, D.C. 2008.** Early livestock grazing in the Blue Mountains. Pendleton, OR: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Umatilla National Forest. 6 p.  
<http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/uma/publications/history/livestock%20grazing%20story.pdf>
- Powell, D.C. 2008.** Early timber harvesting in the Blue Mountains. Pendleton, OR: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Umatilla National Forest. 8 p.  
<http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/uma/publications/history/timber%20harvest%20story.pdf>
- Powell, D.C. 2008.** The Camas Creek timber sale and the Milton Box Company. Pendleton, OR: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Umatilla National Forest. 4 p.  
<http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/uma/publications/history/milton%20box%20company%20story.pdf>
- Robbins, W.G. 1997.** Landscapes of promise: the Oregon story, 1800-1940. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press. 392 p.
- U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. 1990.** Land and resource management plan: Umatilla National Forest. Portland, OR: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Region. Irregular pagination.  
<http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/uma/projects/90-forestplan-cover.pdf>

---

<sup>1</sup> This brief history is prepared from a Euro-American perspective; no prehistory information is included for the period before Euro-American emigrants reached the Blue Mountains.