



HISTORY OF MORROW COUNTY



Morrow County may seem insignificant to the average traveler who cruises along I-84 between Hermiston and Boardman, but it is 2,049 square miles of diverse terrain that stretches from the Columbia River on the north and the Blue Mountains on the south. The elevation ranges from 260 feet to 6,000 feet, offering a broad variety of weather conditions, providing rich farm lands and an abundance of recreational activities. You can camp and ride your ATV in the spring and summer or cross-country ski and snowmobile in the winter. There are exceptional hunting opportunities and fishing is abundant throughout the County. Eastern Oregon was generally passed by as newcomers moved on to settle in the Willamette Valley. Thus, Eastern Oregon . . . everything east of the Cascades . . . became part of Wasco County, as it was already an established county. From available documentation there is little evidence of the early settlement of Morrow County before 1859. It was during that year that John J Jordan homesteaded near the confluence of Willow and Rhea Creeks (near Ione). This is about one-half mile below where the Jordan Elevator now stands. Others began to follow Jordan to these rolling hills covered in bunch grass. By 1862, the land was part of Umatilla County. The population remained virtually unchanged from 1868 to 1870 when cattlemen began immigrating to the area.

Indians were ever-present, but not much of a problem until an attack in 1878 at Willow Springs, about 15 miles south of Pilot Rock. The State Park at Battle Mountain was named for these raids. The early 1880's brought wheat farming with enough success that others followed. The influx of new settlers to this area was enough that a new county could be formed. Through the diligence of Representative J. L. Morrow, a member of the Oregon Legislature, the County was formed and named after him on February 16th, 1885. A. Mallory was named County Judge. His annual salary was \$400.

The temporary County Seat would be in Heppner. During the election of 1886, there was a heated battle between the cities of Heppner and Lexington to become the permanent County Seat. The margin of success was small in favor of Heppner. Lexington cried corruption, but Heppner prevailed and sustained in the Courts.

The year of 1888 was eventful in Morrow County. A tornado hit the Jordan Buttes area demolishing homes, schools and businesses in Lexington. It was also the year the railroad was built, bringing a link to the interior of Morrow County, greatly benefiting the wheat ranches and the stockmen, where getting to the markets previously meant tedious travel by wagon. The Oregon Legislature voted \$10,000 in road improvements for a road through the Blue Mountains to Monument opening a better route for cattle and sheep.

In 1990, the Gazette Times reported shipments from Heppner as follows: wheat/grain - 3,440,111 pounds; wool - 1,225,000 pounds; cattle - 590 head; sheep - 60,580 head; and horse and mules 1,789 head.

Henry purchased the homestead and the old farm house and out buildings east of the Spring Hollow Bridges from the Hayes family in 1897. The out buildings consist of a double walled meat cooler and food storage building located behind and to the right of the house. Sawdust was used as an insulator between the two walls. On the hill behind the lower buildings is a sheep barn and to the east of it is a chicken shed. Below the house and located near the mouth of the canyon is a horse barn. East of the old house is a two holed "privy" or outhouse. A 100+ year old wooden grain storage bin is also located on the hill behind the old house. The grain bin was originally located next to the Spring Hollow road and near the south end of the old bridge.

In 1902, the Morrow County Courthouse was a wooden building that sat on the hill overlooking Heppner. The wood building was replaced, through County resolution, by a stone structure which still stands today. The walls were made of native basalt cut by Charlie Osmin in a quarry a few miles up Balm Fork. The sandstone trim is from a quarry near Elgin, Oregon. The 80' X 60' X 55' building has 264,000 square feet and was built at a cost of \$54,990.10. The citizens of Heppner donated the clock in the tower along with \$2,500. Construction was completed in March of 1903 and is one of the few Courthouses in Oregon built during the turn of the Century that is still in use. Just three months after the completion of the building, the Great Flood of 1903 rushed through Heppner, killing one-fourth of the population but did not touch the Courthouse. The tower clock is said to have chimed thirteen times and then stopped. Truth or Folklore?

During the early 1930's, the U.S. Army Engineers established a civilian conservation corp. Camp at Tupper, and then moved to Heppner where the Rodeo grounds are now. This was established to help with conservation and flood control. About 200 young men came to help with these projects. Many of them remained in the area after the project was discontinued about 1940.

The Heppner Forest Reserve was established by Presidential Proclamation in 1906. In 1907 it became the Heppner National Forest. On July 1, 1908 it was renamed the Umatilla National Forest with its headquarters in Heppner, where it remained until 1915 when it was moved to Pendleton. The current Heppner District's boundaries spread through Morrow, Grant and Wheeler Counties encompassing approximately 228,927 acres.

The first Morrow County Fair was held in 1912 at the now city park on North Main Street in Heppner. Wallace Smead was the first fair manager. In 1922 the rodeo was organized with L.V. Gentry as the manager. The fair was held intermittently for several years, but became an annual event in 1939 when it moved to the current location at the present rodeo-fair grounds on Hinton Creek.