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TABLE ROCK SENTINEL

SEPTEMBER
OCTOBER 1991

P SISKIYOU MTN.
TOLL ROAD
PASSING
THROUGH
THE GAP

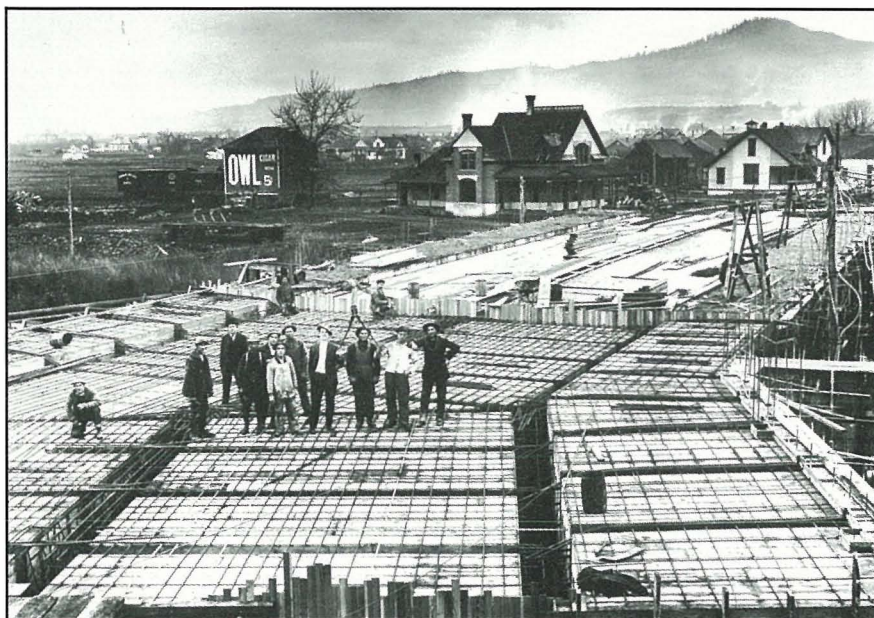
OF **MULES,**
MOUNTAINS,
& MEMOIRS
GORDON JESSE
WALKER

COLE
STATION
THEN AND NOW

The
Magazine
of the
Southern
Oregon
Historical
Society



Seventy-nine Years Ago



Controversy clouded the construction of the new Bear Creek Bridge on East Main Street in Medford during the latter half of 1912. SOHS #7254

By the first decade of this century, the bustling city of Medford had outgrown the narrow, unstable wood and steel bridge which carried Main Street traffic across Bear Creek. One Medford resident commented that "it would make one seasick to stand in the center of the bridge when an automobile was crossing it." In June 1912, the Jackson County Court awarded a contract to build a new concrete bridge to contractor E. G. Perham of Marshfield. Construction began two months later.

Crews had barely begun tearing down the old bridge when a group of disgruntled Ashland taxpayers represented by farmer Benton A. Bowers filed a lawsuit against Jackson County claiming it had no authority to build a bridge which would grant Medford a "special privilege at the expense of the county." The county, in turn, argued that the Medford City Charter allowed the county to construct, maintain, and repair "all bridges and culverts in said city and road district upon any county road costing in excess of \$20." Furthermore, the city of Medford and the Pacific and Eastern Railroad had already agreed to pay a combined amount of approximately \$16,000 toward the \$40,000 structure.

By mid-December, the new bridge's three center spans were nearly complete and the Oregon Supreme Court handed down its verdict in Bower's lawsuit: Jackson County was well within its jurisdiction to build and maintain a bridge within Medford's city limits. The contractor and the county completed the final details and the new bridge was opened for traffic in the spring of 1913.



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The **Table Rock Sentinel** is published bimonthly by the Southern Oregon Historical Society. Administrative and membership offices are at the History Center, 106 N. Central Avenue, Medford, OR 97501-5926. Subscription is free with membership. Single copies and back issues are available for \$2.50 each.

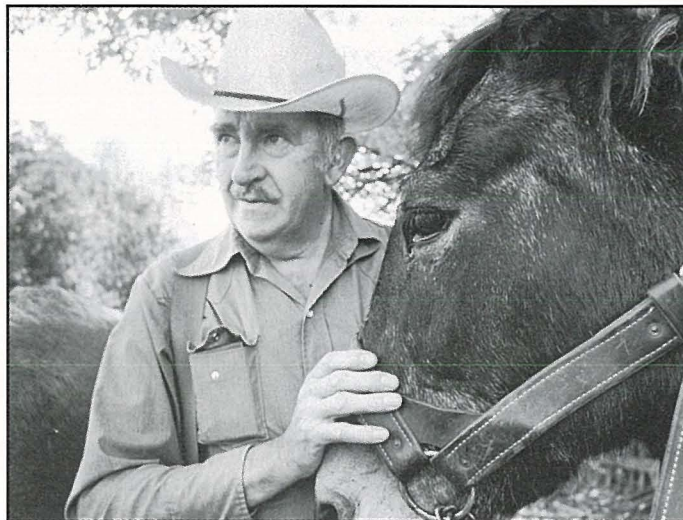
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After the discovery of gold brought waves of California prospectors and hopeful settlers to the Rogue Valley in the 1850s, the need for a serviceable road over the formidable Siskiyou Mountains became apparent. A handful of hardy pioneers turned a narrow, crude trail into the graveled and graded Siskiyou Mountain Toll Road, allowing passage of stagecoaches, freight wagons, and homesteaders.

12 Gordon Jesse Walker: Of Mules, Mountains, and Memoirs *by Robin Speake*

At the drop of his cowboy hat, mule skinner, water-witcher, and author Gordon Jesse Walker will offer up anecdotes collected during seven decades in the Rogue Valley. A natural storyteller, Walker's accounts of packing mules through the Rogue River National Forest are alive with a love of the great outdoors and a fondness for unpredictable government mules.

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Front cover: An unidentified horseman pauses for a portrait. SOHS #11101

Back cover: Longtime Jacksonville photographer Peter Britt's personal collection of photographs included this stereo view of Teddy Roosevelt at Yosemite, marketed by international publishers Underwood and Underwood, ca. 1903. SOHS #10885



PASSING THROUGH THE GAP

by Sue Waldron

About sixty million years ago the growing Cascade Mountains bumped into the older Siskiyou. Where they met, a pass formed. Prehistoric grazing animals used the gap for untold millennia. Later, Native Americans followed the animals, to hunt, to collect the pine nuts and acorns that grew in abundance and to trade and raid other villages.

Probably the first white man to use the path through the gap between the mountains was Peter Skene Ogden in 1827. He led a party of Hudson Bay Company trappers north out of the Klamath River drainage to the Rogue Valley in search of beaver along the banks of Bear Creek and its tributaries.

Ogden was followed in 1838 by a north-bound cattle drive and in 1841 by a U.S. government expedition which crossed through the gap into California. Lt. Charles Wilkes, who led the group, wrote in his journal that the expedition's route followed "... a steep and narrow path, where a single horse was barely *[sic]* room





Meanwhile, representing the new Oregon Territory, Samuel R. Thurston went to Congress in 1849. One of his tasks was to deliver a request for federal aid to improve transportation in the territory. Thurston and his successor, Joseph Lane, spent much of their time over the next four years pleading with Congress for money for roads. Eastern politicians, familiar with moving freight and mail by the many canals and rivers available in the East, were slow to realize that the rushing waters of the westward-flowing Rogue and Klamath rivers were of little use for transportation. Roads were necessary.

It wasn't until January 7, 1853, after the gold strike in southern Oregon, that President Millard Fillmore signed a military road bill approving the allocation of \$20,000 for "... both the Steilacoom-Walla Walla road and for the route from Camp Stuart, near Jacksonville in the Rogue River Valley, to Myrtle Creek, a tributary of the Umpqua River."³ It was a victory of sorts for Oregon's congressional delegates. A year later, another \$20,000

was allocated to extend the military road from the mouth of Myrtle Creek to the settlement of Scottsburg. But still no funds

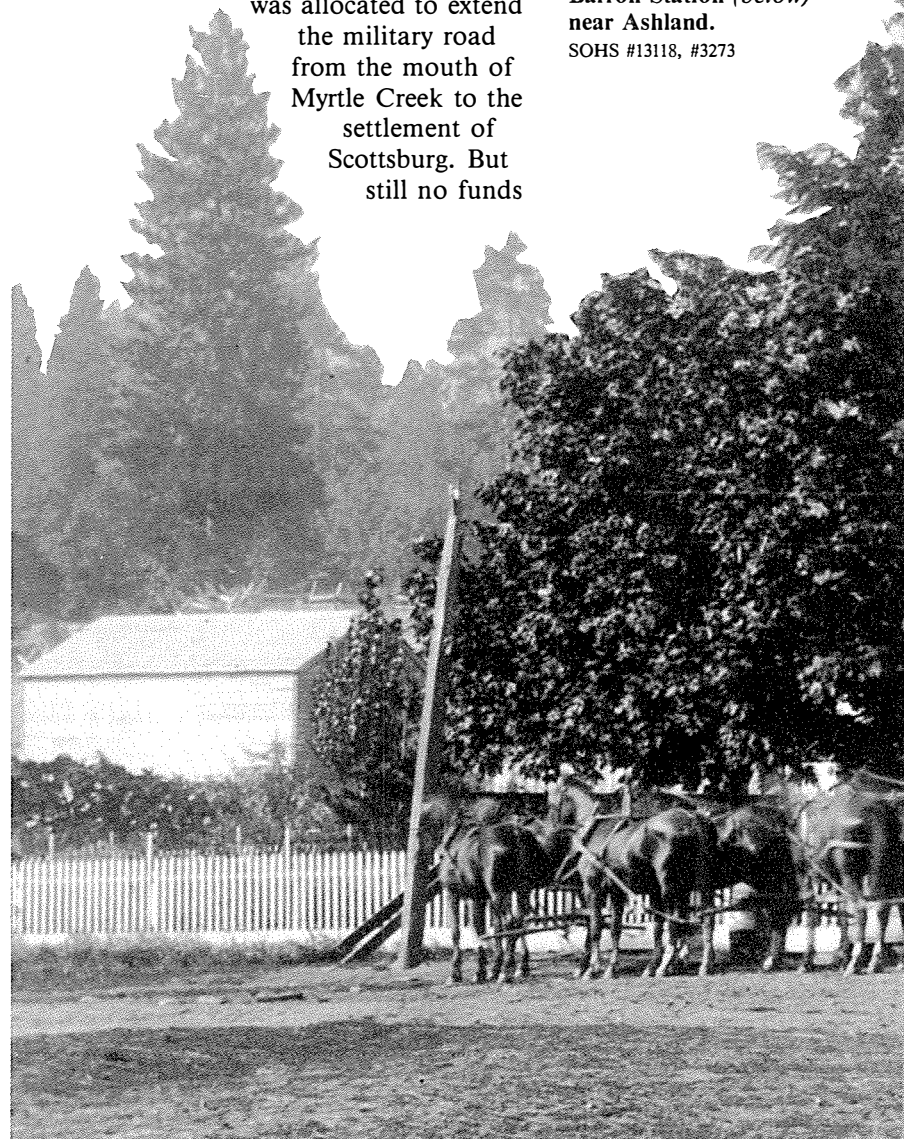
to pass."¹ Near Pilot Rock, southeast of Ashland, the expedition was slowed by Indians, who burned trees which fell across the path "and many other impediments placed to prevent the party from advancing."²

In 1846 Lindsay and Jesse Applegate were also said to have used the pass in their search for a new way to reach Oregon. (Their famous emigrant trail would be farther to the east.) The Applegates remembered the pass three years later when news of gold strikes in California reached them in Polk County. After traveling south through the pass and trying their luck in the gold fields, they soon realized that a more reliable profit could be made by providing supplies to other miners. The pass was soon a regular part of the route taken by pack trains loaded with food-stuffs produced in the Willamette Valley for the hungry miners in northern California.

During the winter of 1851-52, a south-bound pack train stopped for the night on Daisy Creek in what is now Jackson County. The next morning the packers found gold nuggets in the creek! The race to southern Oregon was on as word of the gold strike reached California prospectors. Many of the miners used the trail through the pass between the Siskiyou and Cascade ranges to come north and try their luck in this newest gold field.

During the 1860s, Lindsay Applegate (*left*) operated the toll station on the Siskiyou Mountain Toll Road, which connected the stage stop at Coleston, California, with the Barron Station (*below*) near Ashland.

SOHS #13118, #3273



were found for the route over the mountains that was seeing heavy use by California prospectors.

Freight destined for southern Oregon usually arrived by ship at the port of Crescent City, California. From there pack trains and later stagecoaches carried parcels, gold dust, mail, and passengers into the interior of the state. The Cram, Rogers and Company's Oregon Express, which by 1854 had offices in nearly all the mining camps of the Siskiyou, provided express service to the Jackson County area. Still, no road suitable for wagons connected the Sacramento-San Francisco area of California with the Willamette Valley in Oregon.

The California Stage Company, which

controlled most of the express business in northern California, had the difficult trail between Yreka and Red Bluff open for vehicle traffic by the summer of 1856, but road building stalled at the Siskiyou Mountains. Mail, passengers, and freight headed north had to be transferred to the backs of mules, burros, and horses.

In 1853 the residents of Jacksonville sent a petition to Oregon's Territorial legislature asking that Jackson County be organized. The petition was granted and on March 7, 1853, a commission consisting of James Cluggage, Nathaniel C. Dean, and Abel George was appointed to begin organizing



the county. One of the commissioners' first acts, as entered in the *County Journal*, was:

"Whereas it is the opinion of this board that it is absolutely necessary for the public good and citizens of this county generally, that public roads should be laid out and located throughout the entire valley. It is therefore ordered.

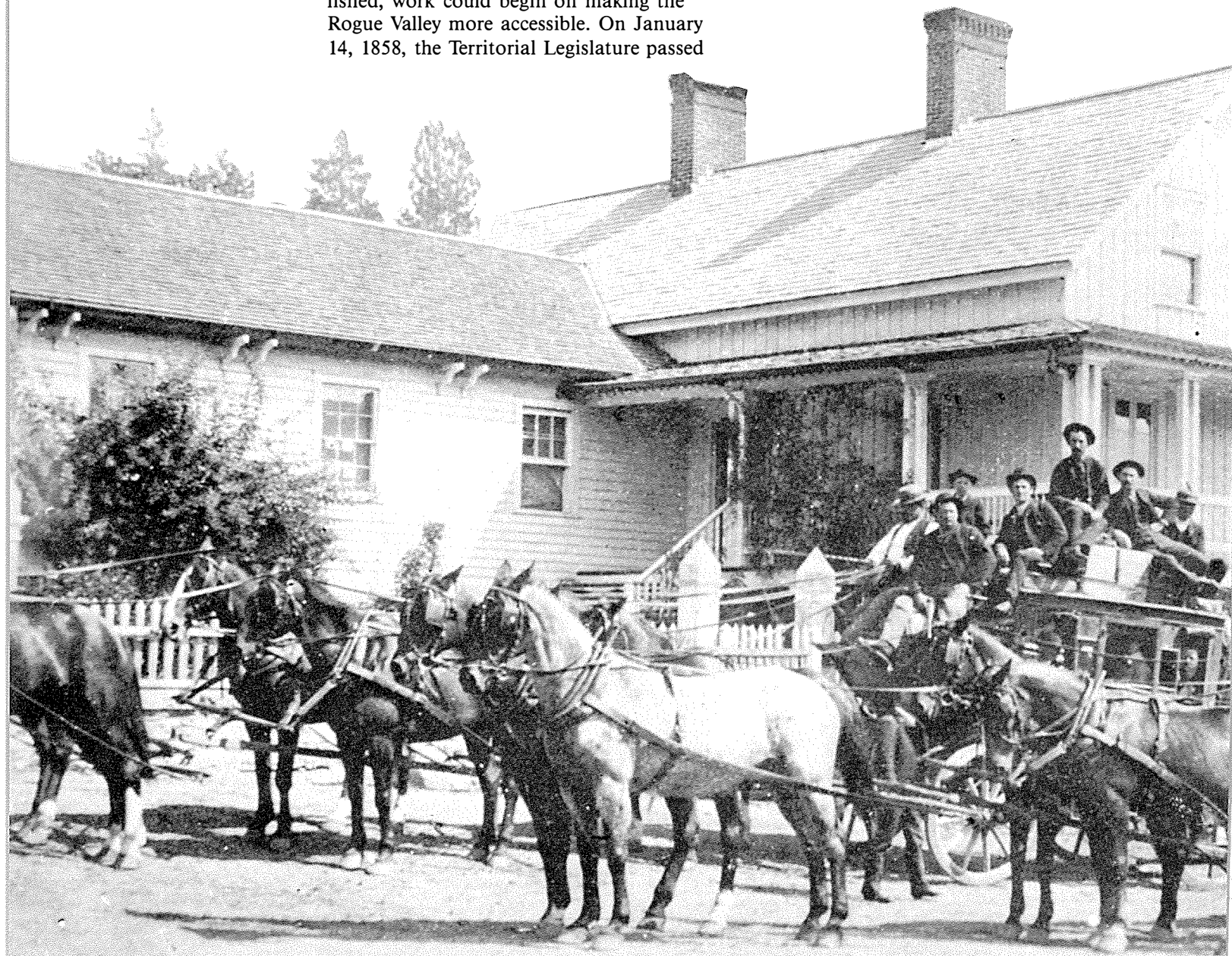
"That the trail as now traveled from its intersection with the northerly end of Oregon street in the precinct of Jacksonville to its junction with the old Oregon Trail (so called) near the residence of Nathaniel C. Dean, at what is known as the 'Willow Springs' be and the same is hereby declared a public highway.

"That all the portion of the said 'Oregon Trail' from its junction aforesaid, to the boundary line of Douglas County in said territory be, and the same is hereby declared a public highway, and also that portion of the said Oregon Trail from the junction aforesaid to the northern boundary line of California, as now traveled."⁴

With the need for county roads established, work could begin on making the Rogue Valley more accessible. On January 14, 1858, the Territorial Legislature passed

an act to incorporate the "Siskiyou Mountain Wagon Company" with a twenty-year franchise for the construction and maintenance of a road over the Siskiyou Mountains. Michael Thomas, former Yreka merchant and the builder of the Eagle Flour Mill north of Ashland, was awarded the franchise. Construction of a road began. Lindsay Applegate and several of his grown sons came south to work for Thomas. When Thomas ran into financial difficulties in 1859, Lindsay purchased the franchise.

The Siskiyou Mountain Wagon Road climbed the foothills south of Ashland, passed in front of the Barron family ranch house ". . . through rocks and scrub oak southwest over the top of the mountain and down to the canyon floor, turning south again to the California border, halting wearily at what was known as Cole's station."⁵



The toll road was completed on August 29, 1859, and opened for business. Lindsay collected the first toll, twenty-five cents apiece from two horseback riders. The new state of Oregon had established the toll rates: \$.25 per horseman, \$1.25 for a buggy, \$1.50 for a wagon with one team, \$3.50 for a wagon with two teams, \$3.00 for a drove of hogs and \$2.50 for a pack train.⁶ First by a steep, narrow trail, then by a road just wide enough for a wagon, California and Oregon were connected.

Keeping the road in good condition and operating the tollgate required constant vigilance and an immense amount of labor. Mud slides and washouts in the spring and packed snow in the winter demanded attention. In 1860 Lindsay moved his family from Douglas County to the log cabin at the tollgate. His daughter Alice, eight years old that year, remembered later that “. . . the first tollhouse was a large log cabin with an immense fireplace of rough stone. The doors were made more secure at night by bars of wood fitted into iron brackets. The windows were similarly protected, for all classes of adventurers swarmed across the mountains.”⁷

On September 15, 1860, the California Stage Company received a government contract to carry the mail between Sacramento and Portland. Traveling the toll road regularly, the stage company proved to be the toll road's most dependable source of income. For the first three years the stage company never paid less

Alice Applegate Sargent recalled having security bars on the doors and windows of the Applegate cabin at the tollgate to protect the family from “all classes of adventurers” who swarmed over the mountains. A rough and ready group at Cole Station (below) appears anxious to tackle the toll road to Oregon.

SOHS #12284, #1180



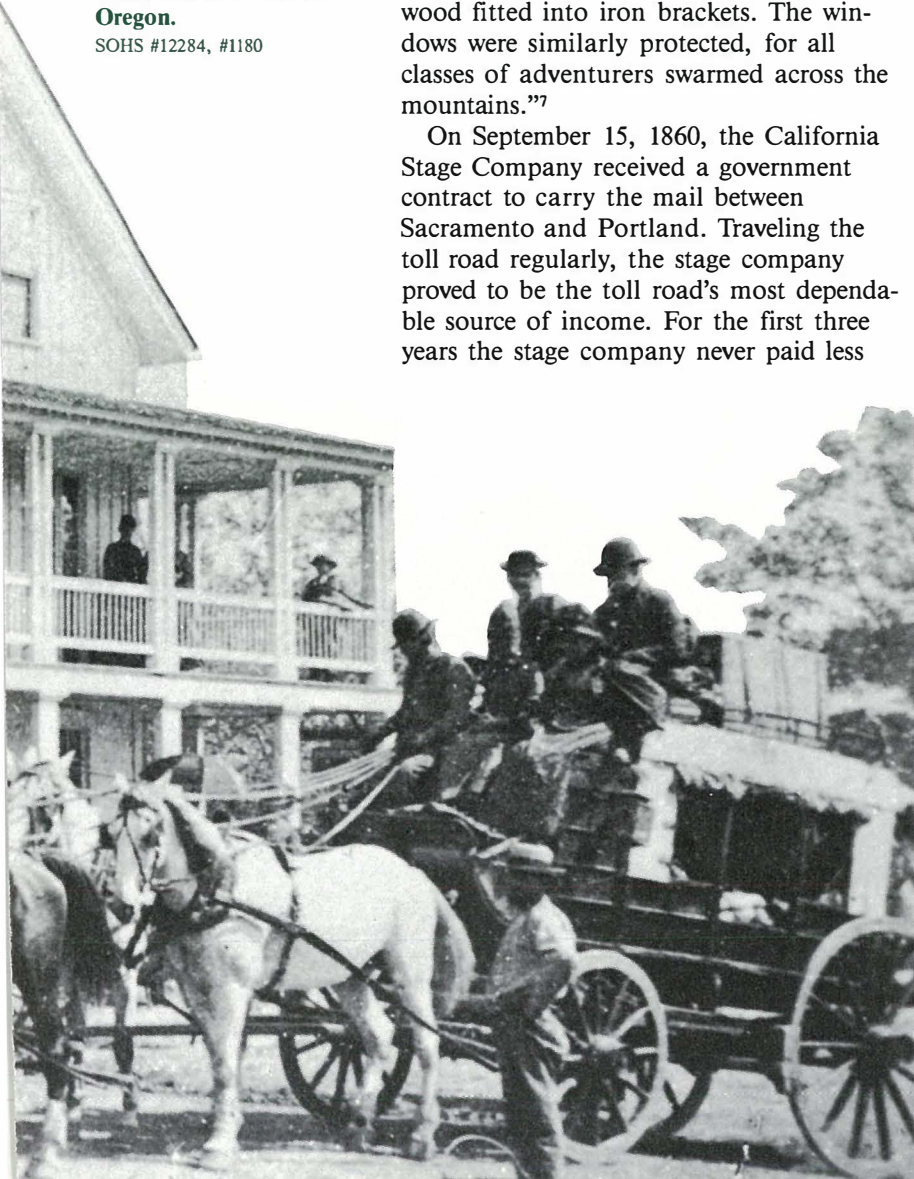
than forty dollars a month and sometimes during the winter when the weather made it necessary to spend the night at the tollhouse, the stage company paid as much as \$103 for the use of the road and accommodations for passengers and drivers.

TOLL ROAD INCOME⁸ 1860-1863

Year	High Income	Low Income	Total
1860	Sept. \$501.25	Feb. \$113.50	\$3,479.57
1861	Oct. \$392.75	Dec. \$105.00	\$3,086.50
1862	May \$516.50	Jan. \$ 75.00	\$3,275.00

Business was prosperous enough that in 1861 Lindsay Applegate built a new tollhouse. The new house was made of lumber hauled by freight wagon from a mill located near the present-day town of Butte Falls. It was two stories high, with two giant fireplaces made of seashell-laden rocks. Alice remembered: “The stage going south reached the tollhouse in the mornings; the stage going north arrived in the afternoons. On cold winter days the drivers of these coaches would sometimes swing down from their lofty seats, to come into the tollhouse and stand with their backs to the roaring fire.”⁹

The Applegate family operated the toll road for nine years. During those years Lindsay and his sons developed an interest in the new country opening up around Klamath Lake. In 1864 Lindsay became the agent for the new Klamath Indian Reservation north of Linkville (now Klamath Falls). Weary of dividing his time between



After acquiring controlling stock in the wagon road in 1875, Henry Dollarhide and family (below) operated the toll station for another four decades. SOHS #744

the two counties, sixty-two-year-old Lindsay sold the toll road in 1871.

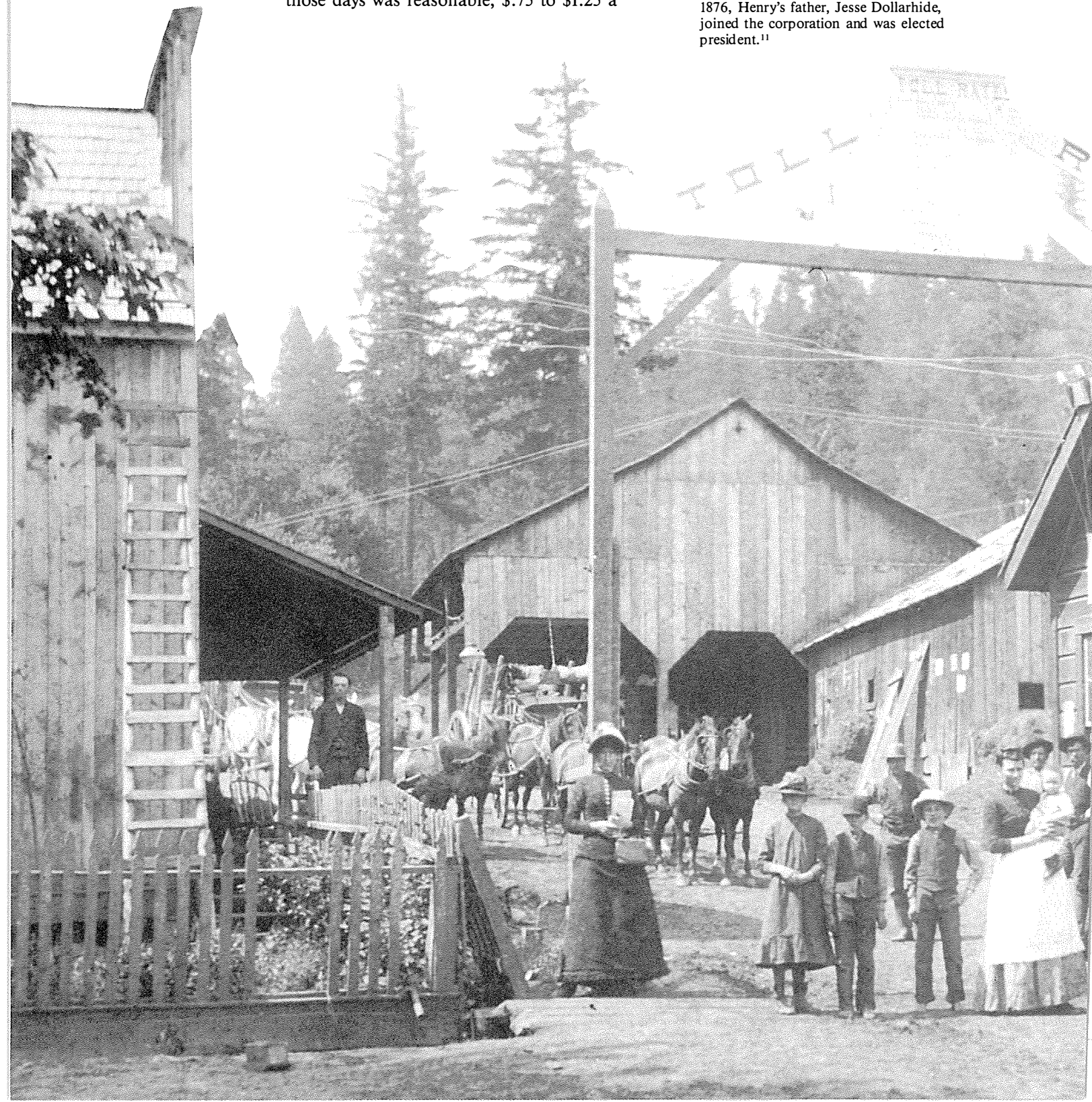
Brothers James and Henry Thornton and their foster father, James Laughlin, purchased the toll road franchise for \$10,000. Henry moved his family to the tollhouse and supervised the operation of the road for the next four years. During the Thorntons' ownership, the road was regraded and graveled. "The cost of labor in those days was reasonable, \$.75 to \$1.25 a

day, and that was from sun-up to sun-down."¹⁰

In 1875, the Siskiyou Mountain Wagon Road

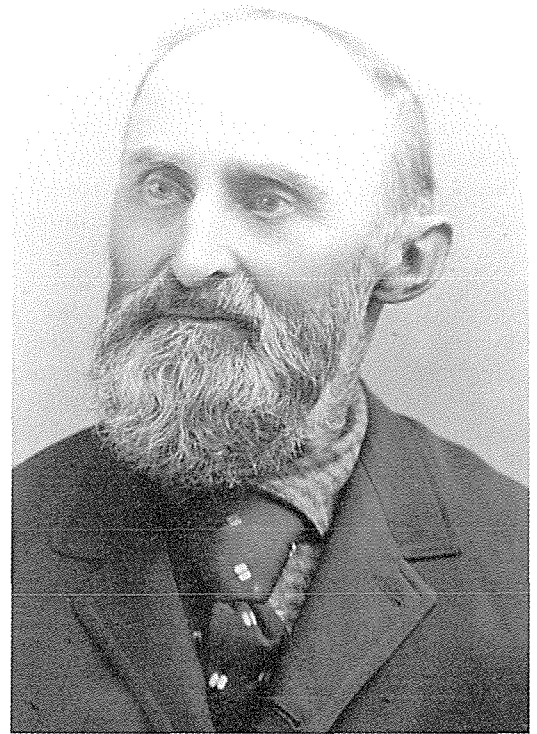
... corporation stock was transferred to Henry Clay Dollarhide (named after the famous U.S. Senator from Kentucky) and two Patterson brothers (relatives of James Thornton's wife).

Henry owned ninety-nine shares of stock, Joseph Patterson had ninety-nine and George Patterson had only two. On Oct. 3, 1876, Henry's father, Jesse Dollarhide, joined the corporation and was elected president.¹¹



James Thornton (right) and two relatives purchased the toll operation in 1871 and set about grading and graveling the rough road. SOHS #525

Dollarhide owned several hundred acres on the side of the mountain through which the toll road passed. "He kept several men cutting wood, and had teams hauling the wood to town," wrote one historian. In order to get away from paying toll over this road, he bought the road from the Thornton brothers."¹² Dollarhide also owned a sawmill, not far from Steinman, that cut ties for the railroad when it crossed the Siskiyou in 1886-87.



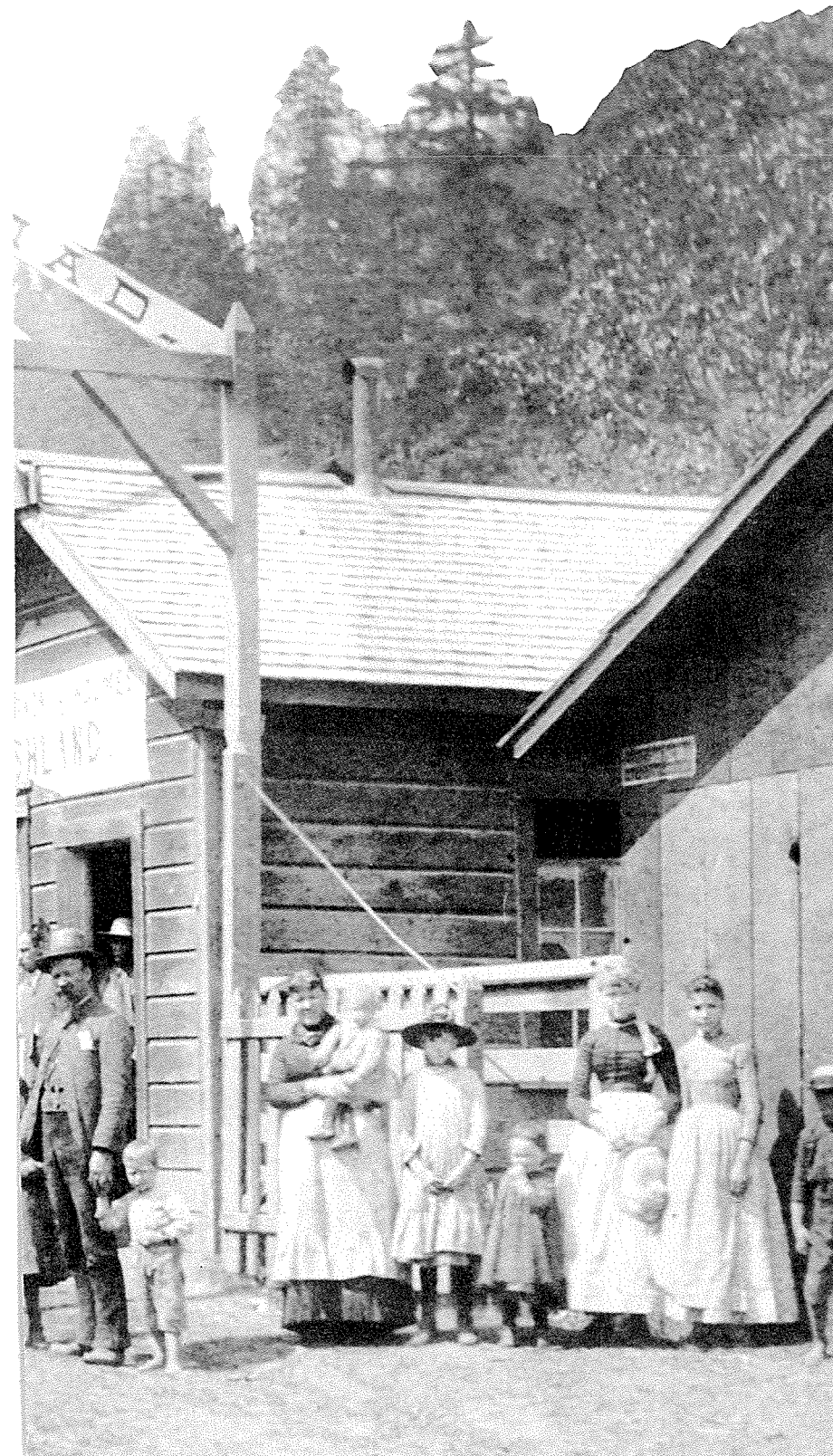
In 1859 Oregon became the thirty-third state in the union. Roads created by territorial legislation became county property, with a provision that toll roads might be leased for a period of ten years. At the end of ten years the county had the option of buying the toll roads from the operators. Jesse and Henry Dollarhide signed articles of agreement with Jackson County on October 6, 1880, in which the Dollarhides agreed to:

... put down sixty rods of corduroy—also lessen the grade on the first hill this side of the state line on the Tollroad one half inch to the foot less than it is at present.

And agree also to keep in good repair said road from Hugh F. Barron's to said state line for a term of Ten (10) years at the same rates of toll as allowed under the present act.¹³

When the stipulated ten years had passed, the county, unwilling to spend money it did not have, made no effort to buy the toll road. Nor did the county have the Dollarhide family sign a new set of articles of agreement. Business went on as usual, except that L. Dudley Dollarhide, younger brother of Henry, entered the business, buying out his brother and father in 1897. Dudley and his family moved into the old tollhouse. In addition to toll collection and road maintenance, the family cooked for the work crews installing the first telephone and Western Union lines over the Siskiyou.

On September 4, 1895, Jackson County attempted to take over the toll road with a



court order directing that the tollgate be removed. When the order had not been executed by November 4, 1895, Dollarhide's lawyer, C. B. Watson of Ashland, requested that the court remove the order; the court did.

Business continued as before. As travel on the toll road increased, more people became unhappy about paying a toll to cross the mountains. Finally, matters came to a head in 1913 when the county decided to improve roads and build a highway over the Siskiyou Mountains, just incidentally taking almost the exact route used by the toll road. On November 28, 1913, Oregon Governor Oswald West was present when Samuel Hill turned over the first shovelful of earth at ceremonies beginning the new road.

Misunderstandings lay ahead. Dollarhide sold the portion of his road from Barron's place to the Steinman railroad tunnel to the county early in 1913, but apparently no one told the road contractor the limits of the purchase. In September 1914, when work crews began building a road across Dollarhide's toll road south of the Steinman tunnel, the county court issued a restraining order against Dudley Dollarhide. He was "... alleged to have made threats backed by a shotgun against workmen employed on the road."¹⁴ The inevitable came to pass on March 8, 1915, when Dollarhide sold the remainder of the toll road to the county for \$1,000.

The Dollarhide family remained at the tollhouse farming and raising cattle. Seeing a need after the Pacific Highway was completed, Dudley built an automobile service station several hundred yards down the highway from the tollhouse. He ran the station until the road changed again with the building of Highway 99.

The toll road was in existence from August 1859 until March 1915, almost fifty-six years. The road had three owners, with the Dollarhide family in control for the longest period of time, forty-three years. The original log cabin tollhouse is long gone. The house Lindsay Applegate

built in 1861 burned in a forest fire in December 1929. The house Dudley Dollarhide built down the highway still stands. The parts of the road not included in the Pacific Highway, Route 99 and now Interstate 5, have all but vanished. A rocky culvert and a faint clearing through the brush are all that remain of the once-vital pioneer link between San Francisco and Portland.



ENDNOTES

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2. Ibid.
3. W. Turentine Jackson, "Chapter V: Federal Military Roads in Oregon Territory, 1853-1859," *Wagon Roads West*, 1965, p. 72.
4. C. B. Watson, "Dollarhide Toll Road and Its History," *Medford Mail Tribune*, October 9, 1914.
5. Don Robinson, "Culvert Last Sign of Dollarhide Toll Road," *Medford Mail Tribune*, August 3, 1956.
6. Ivan D. Applegate, *Siskiyou Mountain Wagon Road Journal*, Volume 1, 1859-1863. SOHS collection.
7. Alice Applegate Sargent, "The Old Toll Road," undated, handwritten notes in the SOHS collection.
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9. Alice Applegate Sargent, op. cit.
10. Bill Elhart, "Look into History—Siskiyou Toll Road," *Medford Mail Tribune*, August 3, 1956.
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12. Bill Elhart, op. cit.
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Sue Waldron is a local historian and writer and frequent contributor to the Table Rock Sentinel.

Freight wagons regularly used the toll road when transporting materials between Oregon and California.
SOHS #11128



Then & Now

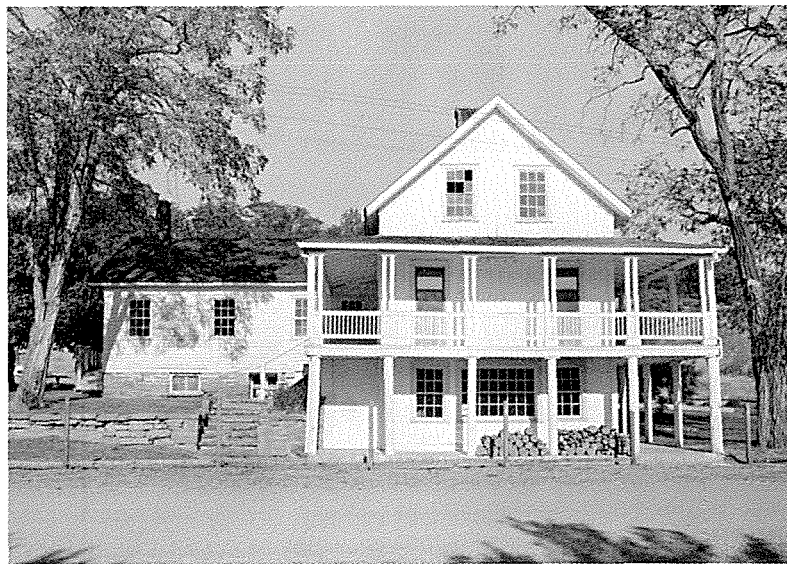
by Natalie Brown

Though glamorized in film and fiction, stagecoaches carried passengers and freight through wild and beautiful southern Oregon for less than three decades. Beginning around 1860, when crude trails became serviceable roads, stages ran regular routes from Sacramento to Portland until the railroad brought more efficient travel in 1887. Covering more than fifty jolting miles per day, road-weary travelers and stage drivers ("whips") looked forward to rest stops at stage stations along the way.

Only two stage stations still exist in Jackson County¹—the Mountain House Stage Station on Old Siskiyou Highway and the Rock Point Stage Station near Gold Hill. But just over the state line stands another structure from that era—Cole Station.

New York brothers Rufus and Byron Cole acquired land claims straddling the state line about 1855. Rufus built a remarkable ranch and home one mile north of what is now the town of Hilt, California. Here, travelers along the tortuous fifty-four-hour stage ride from Redding to Roseburg lunched before launching over the formidable Siskiyou.

By the mid-1880s, the California-Oregon Railroad extending north from Sacramento dead-ended at Cole Station, where passengers disembarked to take a stage via the Siskiyou Mountain Toll Road into Oregon. When the railroad was completed in 1887, stage service along that north-south route died overnight.



Serving today as a private residence, Cole Station stands as a picturesque reminder of the colorful stagecoach era. SOHS #9853

Cole Station, however, would stand up to the rigors of the twentieth century.

Around 1910, the Cole brothers sold their ranches along Cottonwood Creek to businessman Reginald H. Parsons. Parsons owned extensive apple and pear orchards in Medford, and purchased the stateline ranches to winter his horses and mules.

When modern orcharding rendered horse-powered operations obsolete, Parsons moved a prized herd of shorthorn breeding cattle to then-named Mountcrest Ranch. A program for breeding Morgan horses was added, administered by savvy, educated agriculturalist Fred Bayliss, who moved his family into the manager's home one hundred yards south of the former stage stop. Cole Station itself became a

bunkhouse and cookhouse ruled by Florence Clark, sister-in-law to Bayliss.

A bout of deadly bovine tuberculosis and the Great Depression forced changes in local agriculture. Cole Station and portions of the Mountcrest Ranch were sold to rancher William Bray in the early 1930s.

The ranch has changed hands several times since then, leased out and subdivided as the economy and land laws dictated. But Cole Station still stands, serving as a picturesque residence and reminder of the days of colorful cattle barons and knights of the whip.

¹Local legend credits the Colver House in Phoenix as a stage stop, but this has yet to be substantiated.

GORDON JESSE WALKER OF MULES, MOUNTAINS & MEMOIRS

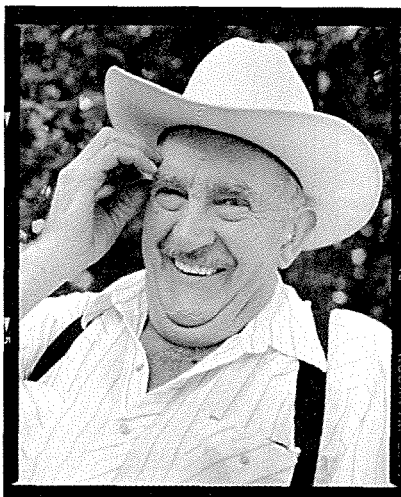


"Now, I'm a natural-born hillbilly, and proud of it," says Gordon Walker, leaning back in his chair. A tall man, whose eyes glint with humor, Walker moves around the Central Point home that he shares with his wife Bea with the graceful energy of a man who has spent years balanced in the saddle of a horse or mule.

"Some people have called me 'that crazy old hillbilly!' Well, they really don't know that they were paying me a compliment," Walker says. He leaned forward, gesturing to make his point. "Boy, I can tell you stories about how I got some of those city slickers lost up there in the mountains. I did it on purpose 'cause they thought they were so smart. Course I never left 'em there. Just took them for a ride a bit."

When he says he can tell you stories, it's an understatement. Walker is one of the most natural storytellers who has ever walked the planet. At the drop of his cowboy hat, Walker will offer up first-hand accounts of packing mules through miles of rugged wilderness during his six years as a mule skinner in the Rogue River National Forest. Walker has spent many years on his own in the great outdoors, riding trails with his horse and mules. He's experienced danger and beauty that would

By Robin Speake



"NOW I'M
A NATURAL-
BORN
HILLBILLY
AND PROUD
OF IT."

leave most people breathless and envious.

Gordon Jesse Walker was born in the Rogue Valley in 1923. His roots run deep in southern Oregon, and he wears his mountain heritage proudly.

"Monroe Gordon, my grandfather on my mother's side of the house," he says, "came to this country in 1862 in covered wagons from Iowa. They settled in the north end of the valley. They were all farmers, ranchers. My wife, Bea, is a native, too. Born in the north part of the state."

Walker grew up in the small town of Beagle, at the north end of the Rogue Valley where his parents ran the post office-general store-gas station. His family had raised cattle and horses for generations, and Walker began his apprenticeship in farming, orchard work, and woodcutting at the age of eleven. By the age of eighteen he was felling and bucking timber with crosscut saws, which led him to logging and sawmill work. Besides preparing him for the rough and tumble life of a mule skinner, logging left him with a lot of respect for timbermen and the forest.

STORYTELLER & MULE SKINNER

"A man has to be tough to live a logger's life," Walker says in his memoirs, *Six Years with a Government Mule*. "I have seen men crippled and killed in the woods and helped to pack them out. I've visited them in hospitals and gone to their funerals too . . . I fought winter snows and mud trying to earn a living for my family . . . had a dozen close calls a day."¹

In fact, one of those close calls was too close and started him and his family on a new path.

"When I was, oh I don't know, twenty-eight, twenty-nine years old," Walker recalled, "got my leg broke logging. After it healed up, I went to work for the Forest Service. Started out planting trees, working out in the woods."

In March 1953, when Walker

was thirty, he took on a new position with the Forest Service, that of mule Skinner. Working under Doug Finch in the Butte Falls Ranger District of the Rogue River National Forest, Walker, Bea, and their then three children, Tricia, Janna and Don, began an exciting way of life that few have had the opportunity to emulate.

Walker moved his family into Lodgepole Guard Station near the South Fork of the Rogue River, and began to get acquainted with his first three government mules: Tom, Dillon and Austin. The animals offered him a new challenge.

"I had worked with cattle and horses all my life and spent many a long, hard day and night in the saddle," he recalled. "But these

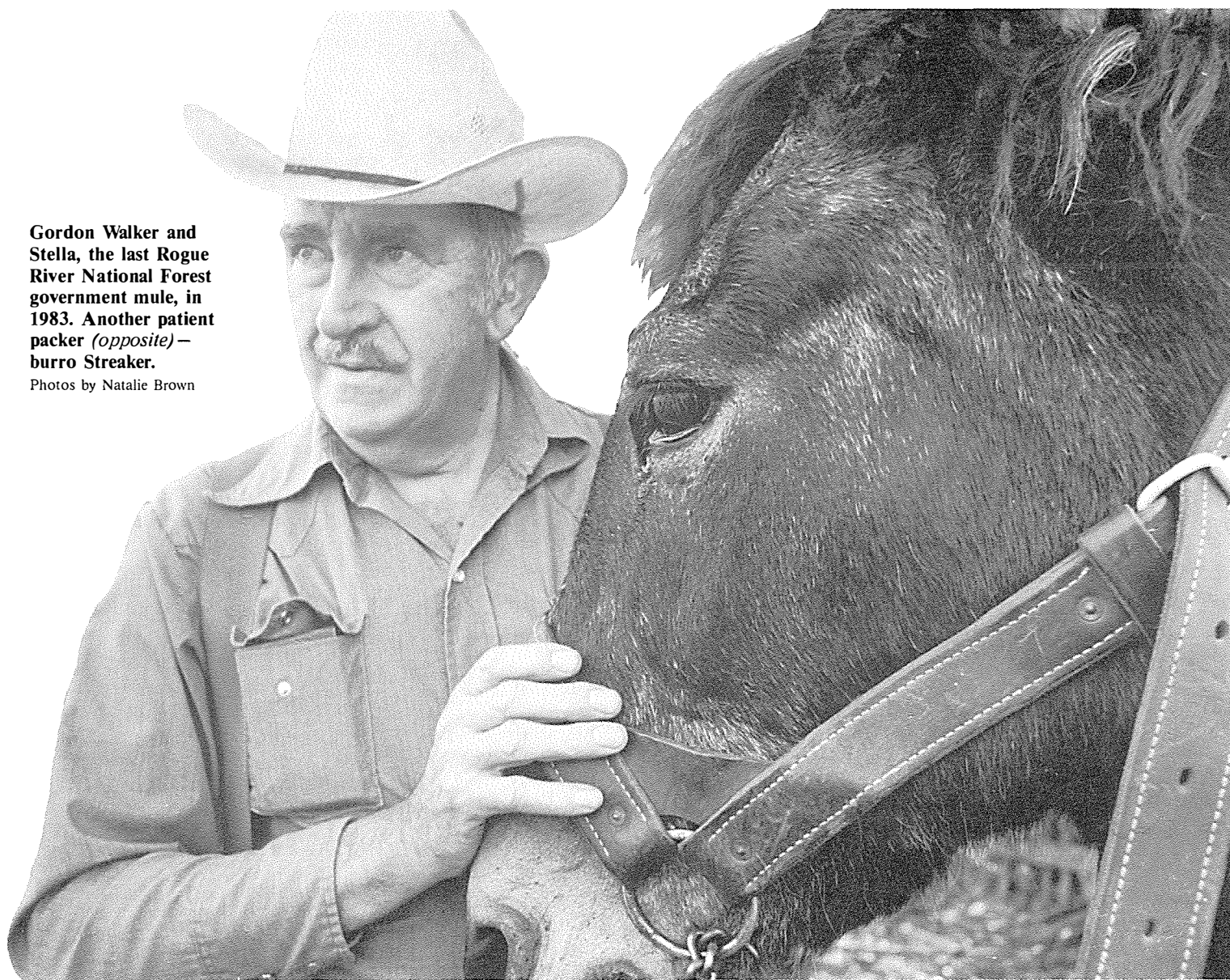
pack mules were new to me. In looking them over, it never occurred to me that my first year working with a string of government pack mules would very nearly drive me back to herding cows."²

That spring Finch showed Walker some of the basics of mule packing, or mule skinning.

"The term mule Skinner started way back in the twenty-mule team," Walker explained. "Pulling those big wagons, you know, following out of the desert. They were called mule skinners, and then later on it kind of drifted down and they had some of these packers that had no respect for a pack mule. They'd go out and skin 'em up and so what. They treated them with gross disrespect.

Gordon Walker and Stella, the last Rogue River National Forest government mule, in 1983. Another patient packer (opposite) — burro Streaker.

Photos by Natalie Brown



GORDON JESSE WALKER

"The term 'take a two-by-four to draw their attention?' That's just so stupid. I don't ever use that term. Never see that term in my writing unless I'm making a derogatory comment on a person. Anyhow, it's not true.

"The mule Skinner part, that's where it come in. They'd take a packstring out and they'd come in all skinned up for some reason or another 'cause of mistreatment or unbalanced loads. But the mule Skinner, it was his fault. His fault entirely.

"I prefer to use the word 'packer.' But then there's some that make fun of you because they visualize you're picking up a mule and packing him around."

From his first day on the job at Lodgepole Guard Station, Walker worked fourteen- to eighteen-hour days carrying supplies to the men manning fire lookouts in the forest.

"When I was a packer I supplied lookouts," he says. "In those days there was fourteen lookouts in the Rogue River National Forest, and now there's only five left. They'd put a man on the lookout. I took care of three lookouts all the time and sometimes four, every summer. I'd have to cart supplies in to them. There was two that were thirteen miles in. That was my pack route, twenty-six miles round trip.

"Devil's Peak is a good example. A man would be there all summer, have no relief. That was the way of life. And I would make the trip to Devil's Peak about once every two weeks, and sometimes more often, with a two-mule load of supplies.

"And Bessie Rock? I'd go in there more often. It seemed like those big rocks sapped the radio batteries or something, so I'd have to make the twenty-six mile trip more often. It was a two- and maybe a three-mule load every time.

"I also took in various supplies for working on the lookout, repair work and so on. And then I supplied trail crews. Construction,



"MY FIRST YEAR WORKING WITH A STRING OF GOVERNMENT PACK MULES VERY NEARLY DROVE ME BACK TO HERDING COWS."

maintenance and recreation crews, and any other crews that were out there had to be supplied by pack train."

Walker and his team were also on call to pack food and water and supplies to firefighters, who would work for days on end battling the forest fires.

"They're [fire fighting crews] crouched up there for a week at a time and longer," Walker says. "When I packed out, I'd always be alone. Always alone. That's the way I liked it."

That first season Walker learned the ropes, packing supplies to Rustler Peak Lookout, Devil's Peak, Blue Canyon and Bessie Rock. He became familiar with the Seven Lakes Trail, Skyline Trail, and breathtaking natural wonders such as Alta Lake and King Spruce Canyon. And he began to create a lifelong bond with his government mules. Walker soon learned his team members' individual habits and personalities, such as Tom's love of food anytime and any place, Dillon's dainty, sophisticated habits and Austin's downright bad attitude.

The work was hard. Often rising before dawn, getting stock fed and packed and on the trail as the sun rose, Walker spent hours alone in remote wilderness with his horse Sundee and the mules, he and the livestock often finding their way home long after dark. They would run into problems most people couldn't comprehend, much less cope with. Making unavoidable treks with a string of mules through deep snow that was "rotten"—soft from the sunlight—and watching mules fall through the crust, sometimes rolling end over end down steep embankments, was a common occurrence for Walker.

Another recurring nuisance for the mule Skinner and his team was yellow jacket nests. A horse or mule, or occasionally Walker's trusty companion and "bear dog" Snoopy, would accidentally disturb a hornet's nest. Chaos would ensue as man and beasts were stung, mules would run off, and packs would end up strewn about.

"I was a mule Skinner, packer, for one whole summer before I could make up my mind if I really wanted to do this because it was so hectic," Walker says shaking his head. "Terrific. It was tough. See, I was a logger until I was twenty-eight years old and I thought it was a tough life, and it is. It's about as hard and rugged and dangerous a life as a person could live. And the mule skinnin' was worse.

"I tell you what. You go up the trail on a dark night with a five-mule string, and you run onto a yellow jacket nest. You can't see a thing, but you can hear. You can smell the dust, and you can feel those yellow jackets, but you can't see 'em. And if that ain't dangerous, I don't know what is. I don't know what can hurt worse than a mule running right down on top of your back.

"But I loved it. There was something about it that you couldn't get away from. They speak of things getting in your blood? Well, I guess that happened to me."

Interestingly enough, besides the romance of being alone in the great outdoors, it was the hardships on the trail that set Walker's adrenaline pumping.

"It's something difficult to describe," Walker says. "The tougher the job I had, the better I liked it. Tougher, hard, mean and ornery, and if I went out there and nothing happened? Well, there was a few times that I'd go out there with a two-mule pack string and there wasn't anything happen. No runaways. Just a day. You can smell the dust. That's ordinary; you can do that all the time. Just a few yellow jackets. Nothing to cause a runaway. And . . . I'd actually go home feelin' grouchy. You know, there was something missin'."

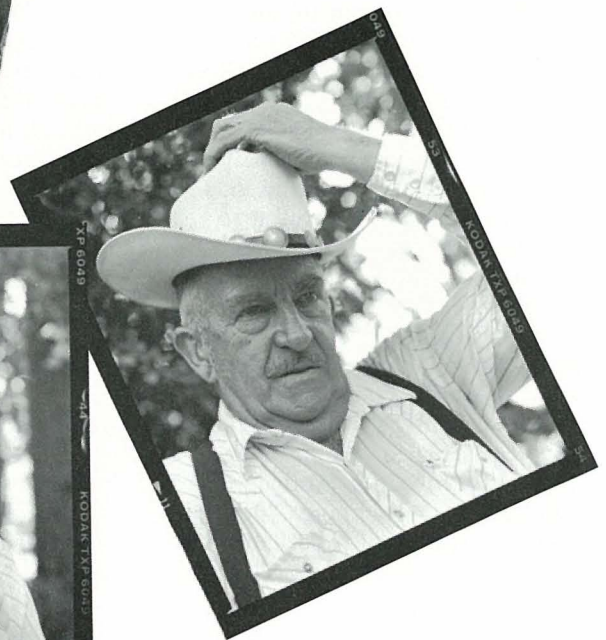
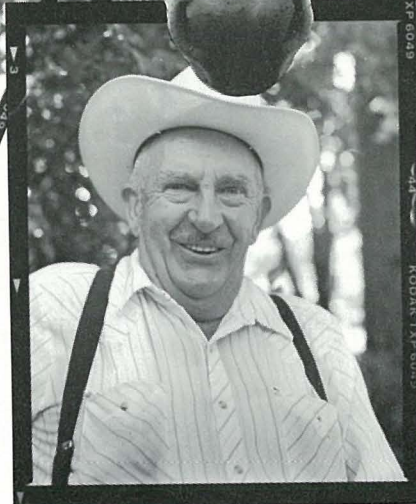
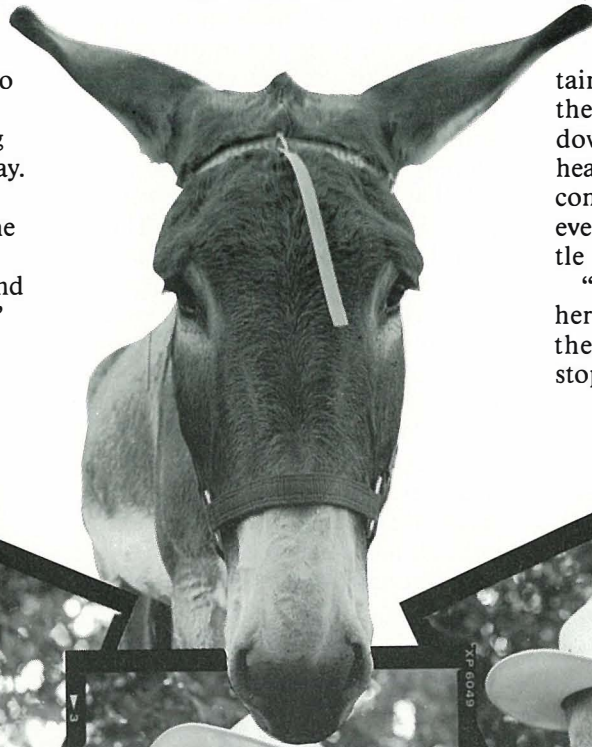
AT THE DROP OF HIS COWBOY HAT, WALKER WILL OFFER UP FIRST-HAND ACCOUNTS OF PACKING MULES THROUGH MILES OF RUGGED WILDERNESS.

Walker was certainly not above introducing a bit of mischief into a slow day to quicken the pace as well as the blood.

"There was one time that this was happening to me, an ordinary day," Walker recalls. "I was coming out of Bessie Rock, making a two-mule drive in there, and the telephone line come down over the trail. Now, my mules always kind of like to lag behind. I turn 'em loose and let them come on their own. And they'd lag behind and eat that old frozen huckleberry brush. They loved that stuff. This one time I was on old Molly and I looked back and couldn't see Tom and Dillon. I decided to try to run off from them mules.

"I just touched old Molly in the side with my spurs and down the trail we went. She laid her ears back and stuck her head straight out and her tail was out and she was running like the wind. She just loved it. I pulled up, stopped and went up the mountain in small timber, trees about the size of the ceiling, and I got down and waited. Pretty soon I heard them. Down that trail they come, zoom right on past, and everything was quiet for just a little bit.

"Then they turned around and here they come on back, right on the path of my tracks. They stopped and they tracked me down



like a hound dog. They got there within about twenty feet of me and raised their heads and stood there lookin' at me . . . you can't run away from a mule.

"That was so much fun I decided to do it other times, and what that did, it broke the monotony, see? Another time I reached up and started tapping on the telephone line with a stick. Boy that sets 'em off, just runs 'em crazy, 'cause they can hear that tick . . . tick . . . tick, and can't figure out where it is. Here they come zooooooooom, down the hill. But times like that I learned to love those mules."

After that first season as a mule skinner, Walker discovered he loved the job and he returned to Lodgepole the following summer. The mule skinning life had turned out to be ideal for the Walker family, too. The kids had a chance to be outside exploring nature, eating wild strawberries, playing in the creek. One summer they even made a pet of a porcupine they named Freddy.

"I had my family right out there at the guard station with me," Walker recalls. "And I wasn't really gone . . . well I was gone a lot. My shortest day was fourteen hours. My shortest trip was twenty-six miles. But I was there every night, you know, and sometimes day after day after day 'cause I'd be on standby, fire standby. If I was sent to another state or something to fight a fire, I'd be gone ten days or a week at a time. Generally I did come back to Lodgepole."

"But it was a perfect place to raise kids. That's where my kids got their start. They loved it to pieces up there. Janna, she and her husband both work for the Forest Service. And all three daughters grew up and married Forest Service men, and Don, our oldest son, worked for the Forest Service for twelve years. He's a timber grader now, has been for a long time."

"But they loved it [Lodgepole]; it was their summer home. They went out there and lived and it was just unbelievable, absolutely

"I DON'T KNOW WHAT CAN HURT WORSE THAN A MULE RUNNING RIGHT DOWN ON TOP OF YOUR BACK."

unbelievable. I had twelve, fourteen head of stock all the time, horses and mules. I was able to teach those kids something they would never be able to learn any other place about wilderness livin'. We were sixteen miles remote, you know."

Walker packed through the summer season, from the fourth week in June until the first of November, sometimes working until the winter snows lay deep on the ground.

"That was the first time I went to Lodgepole," Walker says. "The time I pulled out in snow about waist high. I can tell you stories about that, I tell you. I've been up on top when it was so cold, absolutely so cold, the wind blowin' so hard that my pack mule, you couldn't see any black on him at all except the holes in their ears and eyes. Their eyelashes were huge, like pencils. And I was so cold all my joints ached. Hypothermia. I ain't ever heard the word yet. But that's what it's called now. I just hung in there."

As devoted to his family as he was to his work, Walker kept them at Lodgepole as long as possible each year before moving back to their home in Butte Falls for the winter.

"I'd bring the family down about the middle of October, something like that," Walker says. "It varied. Now, when Don started school I had to get them home earlier."

Walker's love for his family, and appreciation of parenthood, is as evident in his stories and writing as his love of the mountains and his mules. In one of the many humorous passages in *Six Years with a Government Mule*, Walker ruefully explains how a man with a passel of children might learn about the properties of an Englemann spruce tree:

An Englemann spruce grows where there is plenty of water, like in low places or draws where the water is high. A ten- or fifteen-year-old spruce looks as though it would make a dandy Christmas tree; but don't let its beautiful, tight, dark green foliage, shaped symmetrical, fool you. Because of its stickery needles, it is miserable to cut down and pack out of the woods. After it is mounted on a tree stand in the corner of the living room, it looks like it was well worth the effort of getting punctured and scratched as you dragged and carried it out of the forest. The heavy limbs hold the Christmas tree lights up well and all the other decorations look so nice. Then, after a day or two in the warm house, you notice a peculiar smell. It reminds you of the times while the kids were little and you left a couple of wet baby diapers laying too close to the fireplace. The beautiful Englemann spruce is starting to get even for giving up its life so as to become a decoration for Christmas. Another very annoying thing about the tree was that when little hands reached out to touch the fluffy-looking boughs, sharp-pointed needles punctured tender skin and caused much sorrow and grief. The little kids slowly began to think that Christmas trees were put there to hurt them rather than bring joy and happiness to their little souls. But because of all the work you went to and the fact that Christmas was only a few days away, was reason enough to tolerate the unpleasant smell and hope that the Band-aids™ held out until the fateful day arrived when the tree could be taken down and hauled away.³

Besides a lifelong fondness for his government mules, Walker's six years mule skinning left him with a wealth of stories to tell. His book is chock full of his exploits in the national forest. But visit with Walker a while and he'll reel off a few more tales; some about the mysteries of nature, or about his time on the trail. It's a little

GORDON JESSE WALKER

hard to pin him down as to which is his favorite story, for that will remind him of an even better one.

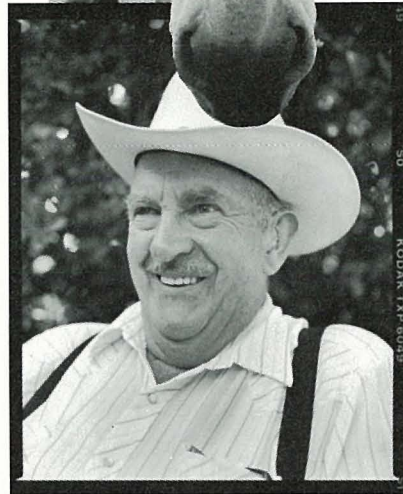
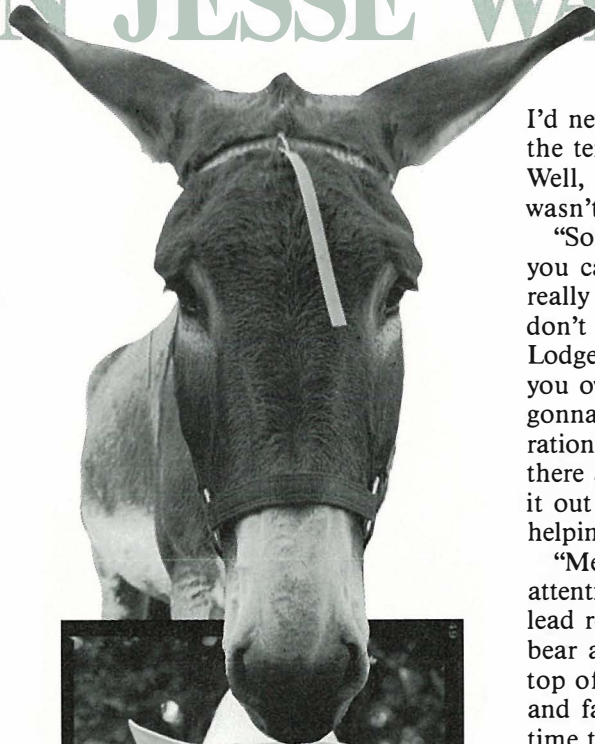
"It would be hard to sort out a favorite story," Walker says, his eyes lighting up. "So probably that one where I hauled the bear would be a fine one.

"I went in and I shot this bear, shot him with a pistol, one of these single-action Rugers. See, I always carried a gun, carried it over here on my hip. I took aim on the side of the tree and pulled the trigger, and down he come. I cleaned him up, got him all dressed out, rolled him in a tarp, you know.

"Meanwhile, there was a seven-man trail crew up there at a place called Hemlock Lake, seven miles remote. As I walked back to the tent about a hundred yards up the other side of the hill, these guys were standing on the side, kidding me, you know: 'Now just what do you think you're gonna put that bear on?' I knew I was gonna carry it out on a mule, and I knew I wouldn't have any trouble. But I thought, well as long as I'm at it I might as well have me some fun.

"So I said, 'Son-of-a-gun, I think maybe I'll put it on old Dillon.' Aha-ha-ha, those boys were all knee slappin'. One of them said, 'I just want to see that.' Seven men, grown men there. Some of them were old-time packers, too.

"Anyhow, I got down there and Dillon was one of these mules that walked up to you, just fine with anything. But he would jump around at the end of that lead rope until he could see what you had. Then you could go ahead and put it up on him. On the way down to where Dillon was, this was goin' through my mind. I got down there and I walked around, and Dillon was down with his head toward the lake. It was perfect. I walked up to him and he saw me, and man he just about tugged down at the end of that rope. Pulled back snorting. Those boys they just laughed and laughed.



STELLA AND BIG RED WERE THE LAST ROGUE RIVER NATIONAL FOREST MULES.

"I laid the bear down and I went over and found old Dillon, pulled his head up real close, started thumpin' him between his eyes. When his eyes go blink, blink, blink—that means I've got his attention. I started giving him a stroking and said 'now Dillon, you've gone off snorting like that,'

I'd never cuss at him. You've heard the term 'cuss like a muleskinner?' Well, I never was like that. It wasn't really necessary.

"So, I told him, 'now, Dillon, if you carry this bear out I'm gonna really treat you good, but if you don't pack this bear down to Lodgepole for me, I'm gonna tie you over by the fence and I'm gonna give everybody else a half ration of oats and you gotta stand there and watch 'em. If you bring it out I'll give you a double helping.

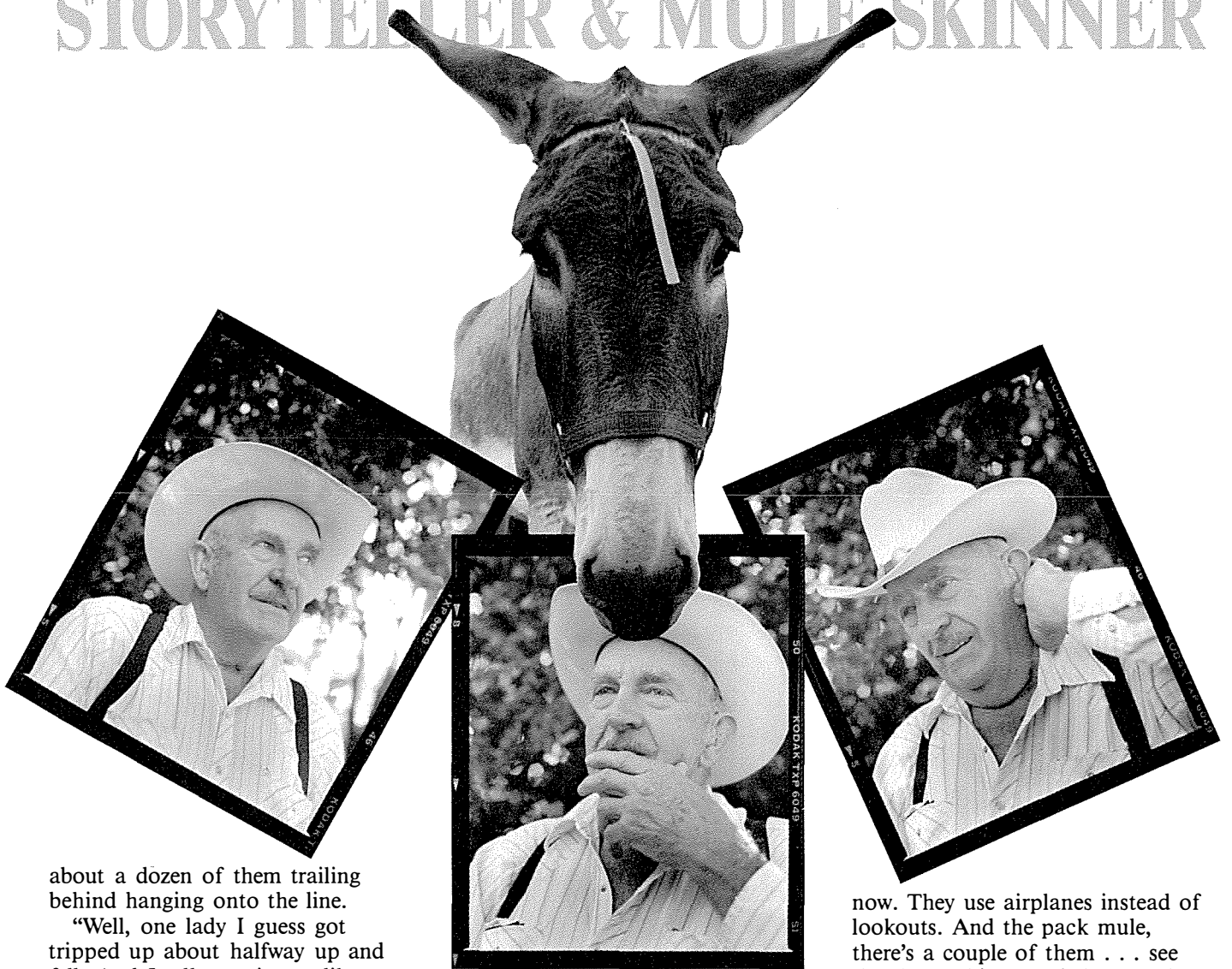
"Meanwhile, I'm drawing his attention and turned loose of the lead rope, walked over and got the bear and walked up and laid it on top of Dillon, across the boxes, and fastened it down. And all the time this happened, my Arabian mare was nudging me, wanting me to go. So, I got the bear tied on and was swung up into the saddle, and rode out about, oh, a hundred feet, turned around and waved at the crew and went on down the trail."

Walker's last year at Lodgepole was in 1958. He continued with the Forest Service, transferring to the Ashland Ranger District in 1961. There he became fire control officer. Walker spent the next six and a half years becoming familiar with the stunning landscape of the south part of the Rogue Valley and adding to his collection of stories.

"I was working as fire control officer over in the Ashland area and it was winter," Walker says, chuckling. "This was in the early sixties, before they had developed Mount Ashland as a ski place. They were just in the process of thinking about it. Anyway, one day I had a group of city slickers who wanted to go up skiing.

"What we did then was to pull them up on a rope behind a sno-cat. Now, I told my group before we left that if anything happened I couldn't stop, I had to keep going or the sno-cat would slide back down on 'em. Everyone nodded like they understood. So, they're all dressed in their fancy ski clothes and we start up the slope there,

STORYTELLER & MULE SKINNER



about a dozen of them trailing behind hanging onto the line.

"Well, one lady I guess got tripped up about halfway up and fell. And I tell you, it was like a pack of dominoes, they all fell down and got tangled up together. They were yelling at me to wait and stop, but of course there was no way I could do that without crushin' them. I got to the top and looked down at a ball of them city slickers' arms and legs going every which way. They weren't too happy, but it was hard to keep from laughing, it was such a sight."

Though muleskinning was no longer the primary activity in his work, almost all of his Forest Service positions included time in the saddle with his beloved government mules behind him. Following his Ashland stint, where he led a five-mule pack string from one to three times a year, Walker transferred to the Union Creek District and worked as fire control officer there. As resource assistant on the

Prospect Ranger District for five years he rode with cattlemen. And in the four years he was in charge of the forest trail maintenance and signing program, Walker rode 700 to 800 miles a year with his mules. Walker spent his last six years with the Forest Service in Prospect in charge of range and wildlife, riding with cattlemen and wildlife people.

In 1983, Walker retired from the Forest Service, the last muleskinner to work for the Rogue River National Forest.

"They phased the mules out because the transportation system has changed so much," Walker says, shaking his head. "In other words, the lookouts, so many of them have been eliminated, and trails have been replaced with roads, and their fire detection capabilities are so much different

now. They use airplanes instead of lookouts. And the pack mule, there's a couple of them . . . see there's one hinny and three pack horses on the forest. The four of them are in Butte Falls. There's a woman packer and she is good. She's a good packer. I made one trip with her, and that's one of the most hair-raising trips I've ever had of all of them."

Fortunately, when he left the Forest Service, Walker was able to take one of the government mules, Stella, with him.

"Yeah, I retired in September of 1983," Walker recalls. "And the day I retired, they retired that black mule, Stella, and gave her to me. I did the paper work. We transferred her to the Humane Society, and then I was her custodian until the day she died. And I had to have her put to sleep. Her grave is up there in Prospect."

"And old Big Red, I had to have him put to sleep while I was still working with the Forest Service.

He got something wrong inside and I couldn't pull him out of it. He was thirty-one and Stella was forty-two. And they were the last two mules on the Rogue River National Forest. There are no more mules.

"Now, there's a hinny. A hinny is the opposite of a mule," Walker laughs as he points out the delicate differences between mules and hinnies. See, a mule, the mother is a mare and the daddy is a jack, a male burro, donkey. They're all the same, and they run in various sizes. The size determines the size of your mule.

"And a hinny, the mother is a female donkey or burro and the daddy is a stud horse. And a hinny, their features are like a horse's, their head is kind of shaped like a horse's, and they're meaner than a son-of-a-gun most of the time. Why, I don't know. But I've seen some awful gentle hinnies good for packing. And that's what they've got up there. That hinny's a nice little hinny . . . if they're lucky enough to catch him."

Though retired, Walker has not slowed down a bit. Besides being a favorite speaker among community groups, Walker is a respected dowser, a skill he discovered as a teenager and developed when he was a tree planter. He is often called out to all areas of the Rogue Valley to "water witch" a site.

As generous with his knowledge as he is with his stories, Walker enjoys teaching people interested in the great outdoors the finer points of muleskinning.

"I teach people how to pack. I'm an instructor," Walker says. "It's fairly popular. More than I hope to tell you. People do it for recreation. Mostly local people. Originally, I put out my feelers to see what would happen. That's when I went over and had a talk with Rogue Community College over here. They signed me up, did all the advertising and everything, and I had seventeen people, and

only two animals to teach 'em. They wouldn't let any of these other people bring animals in 'cause I was working over here at the Expo at the time, teaching there. And I never had any drop-outs. The college could hardly believe it, said that was unbelievable, no drop-outs. They stayed with me, you know. And they're packers.

"I quit teaching out at Rogue Community College 'cause there was no money there and I had no control. I teach individually now, and I charge sixty dollars for each person. And I stay with them from now on. I told this one woman, 'Boy, you are stuck with me. As long as you need any help, you just holler and come around and I'll show you whatever you forgot.' I was just kiddin' her."

Walker's respect for the outdoors and the kind of person who thrives in remote wilderness shines through when he talks about his packing students.

"These people are really special," he says, "You take fishermen, hunters and muleskinners and cowboys and you got a different class of people. Some of them it all fits and some of them only one or two things fit. But I found one thing that these people have is a special personality, hospitable type. They're friendly."

One of Walker's favorite occupations is his leather work, an avocation he picked up in 1944. His skill and enthusiasm are displayed all over his home. Everything that's not nailed down seems to be encased in beautifully tooled leather.

DO YOU HAVE
A MINUTE
TO SIT?
I GOT A STORY
TO TELL YOU . . ."

Walker leans over to share one of his secrets. "The best leather preservative I ever found was fresh, unsalted butter. My old saddle is just as supple as could be, and I bought it when I was sixteen years old."

And, of course, of all of his pastimes, Walker's favorite is writing.

"I do lots of writin'," he says. "That's one of my tranquilizers, see. I can set here writin' and forget about everything else."

After years of storytelling, his children encouraged him to write his tales down. *Six Years with a Government Mule*, which was published in 1990, was the result, a slim volume filled with his exploits in the wilderness. Besides numerous short stories and reminiscences, Walker also wrote a definitive how-to book for the novice muleskinner. *Load 'Em Up, Tie 'Em Down*, published in 1982, covers the basics of packing a mule and trekking into remote landscapes.

These days find Walker busy with his kids and grandkids, writing new stories, water witching and fixing up a leather workshop in the back of his home. But he's never too busy to stop and chat and share his rich knowledge of the great outdoors. And Walker is *never* too busy to pause and tell a story. A visitor to his home barely has time to view the photographs of his government mules that line the living room walls before Walker says with a twinkle in his eye and a dreamy look on his face: "Do you have a minute to sit? I got a story to tell you . . ."



ENDNOTES

1. Interview with Gordon Jesse Walker, January 1991.
2. Gordon Jesse Walker, *Six Years with a Government Mule*, Graphic Press, Klamath Falls, Oregon 1990.
3. Ibid., p. 2.
4. Ibid., p. 13.

Robin Speake is a writer/artist living in Ashland who always has time to listen to a good story.

GORDON JESSE WALKER

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from June 1 to July 31, 1991

*Indicates upgraded membership
category or monetary contribution in
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The Table Rock Sentinel

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from the Collections

by Janette Meek

A broadax is used to hew round logs into square beams. The more history revealed about this ax, the more respect is due the man who used the tool, the buildings he constructed with the hewn lumber, and the broadax itself, which survived the endless blows as it bit into the wood. From 1865 to 1882, Byron Cole used this broadax to hew 120,000 board feet (one foot square by one inch thick) of lumber in the Siskiyou Mountains. The Cole family constructed a two-story building that was used as a hotel, Colestin Mineral Springs Resort, two large hay barns, one large stable and small outbuildings with the lumber.

W. L. Cole donated the broadax to the Southern Oregon Historical Society in 1964, explaining at the time that the broadax blade lost three to four inches in width from the sharpening and grinding required to hew all that lumber. Today, the iron broadax blade measures ten inches by thirteen and three-quarters inches along the bit and weighs eighteen pounds. The poll is marked with an unreadable manufacturer's name and originally held a wood handle approximately twenty-eight inches long.

The Society houses numerous objects which, owing to limited exhibit space, are not often seen by visitors. We hope that featuring an item in each issue of the *Table Rock Sentinel* will provide an enjoyable and educational glimpse of the scope of its collection.





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The
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