

## **The Town of Kerby** **By Dennis Powers**

When driving on the Redwood Highway (Highway 199) from Grants Pass to Crescent City, one passes the tiny places of Wilderville and Selma before coming to Kerby, a short distance north of Cave Junction. This old hamlet has about 500 hardy folks from garage mechanics and redwood sculpturers to those who man the Kerbyville Museum.

Trailing the Illinois River to there, the Redwood Highway basically follows an old wagon trail that led to the port of Crescent City. The discovery of gold at Sailor Diggings in 1852 along the river brought the first settlers to the Illinois Valley, which was then part of Jackson County. In 1855, James Kerby homesteaded in the valley and one year later, set up its post office as the first postmaster. With the town of Kerbyville named after him, his chosen location was on the main route from the sea and California into the newly discovered gold fields.

As miners, merchants, and their families searched for new and easier gold finds, Kerbyville became more populated, especially since it was a stagecoach stop on the way. When Josephine County was carved from the western part of Jackson County in 1856, Sailor Diggings (renamed Waldo) became the first county seat--but only for one year. When its gold began playing out, Kerbyville in an 1857 election became the new county center due to the relocations and its proximity. The county officers then included three county commissioners, sheriff, auditor, treasurer, probate judge, and coroner, along with a U.S. District Court presence.

The Oregon Territorial Legislature one year later renamed it as "Napoleon"--possibly due to an influential landowner who greatly admired Napoleon III, the then ruler of France and grandson of the Empress Josephine--but the name soon changed back to Kerbyville. The town later became known by its short version of Kerby.

When the railroad came through Grants Pass, however, this important development brought it into the forefront, and in 1886 it became the new county seat which continues to today. With much of the area's commercial activities centered on gold mining, farming, and supplying provisions to the miners, the area began to decline in the late-1850s to early-1860s when the precious gold became more difficult to find. Residents left Kerby, as well, and the good times came to an end.

In 1879 at a sheriff's auction, Mr. William Nauke bought for \$5 nearly two acres of land in Kerby and had a house built for his family. It also served as a general store, post office, and stage stop on the road to the coast. Today, the Kerbyville Museum is part of the Nauke house property. The museum has exhibits depicting the pioneer days, the Illinois Valley in the 1900s, and early Native American life: This section displays baskets, grinding tools and stones, blankets, arrow and spear points, pottery, and many other artifacts. The property includes an early-day log schoolhouse built on Sucker Creek--and with the important outhouse.

The unincorporated community of Kerby is still about the same size it was when being the county seat over 150 years ago, and the museum shows what life was like then. Kerby still exists, although it's now basically a tiny suburb of Cave Junction.

Sources: "Oregon.Com: Josephine County," at [Josephine County](#); Greg Walter, "The Oregon Encyclopedia: Kerbyville," at [Town of Kerby \(Kerbyville\)](#); Ron Brown, "KDRV.Com: Kerbyville Museum Holds Fundraiser," at [Kerbyville Museum and Town](#); Alice Mullaly, "Oregon Centennial Inspires Kerbyville Museum," Jefferson Public Radio: As It Was, October 24, 2008, at [Kerbyville Museum](#).