

Native Americans: Claiming the Land **By Dennis Powers**

Skirmishes between miners and the trailing settlers in Southern Oregon with the Indian tribes became near commonplace in the 1850s. From the Applegate River to Bear Creek and the Rogue River, prospectors came in numbers as gold was discovered. Hauling supplies in January 1852 from the Willamette Valley to Sacramento, two mule packers camped by a foothill and started digging a hole to water their mules. As they dug, they noticed a gold color and by accident had discovered a rich gold deposit. As word quickly went out, by the winter of 1852, over 2,000 people were in the area. The town was later named Jacksonville.

The same gold strikes occurred in the early 1850s along the Applegate River in what's now Josephine County. Northern California was no different, in that the accidental discovery of gold in early 1851 led to 5,000 people camped by that August at Yreka's present location. Motivated by the donation land and later homestead acts, a rush of merchants and settlers followed.

Under the 1850 Oregon Donation Land Claim Act that expired in 1855 (allowing also land purchases after then but at very low prices), a married couple acquired 320 acres of farmable land at no cost, while a single man could gain title to 160 acres. (If settlers could be in the Oregon Territory--comprising later the states of Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and part of others by December 1, 1850, the acreage acquired was doubled.) With these sizeable land grants, settlers consequently poured into the Bear Creek, Rogue, and Illinois Valleys.

As Atwood and Gray wrote: "With settlement, the country known to the hunter gatherers changed forever. White farmers turned Indian village sites and camas fields into pastures, and converted native grasses to wheat and oats..."

"By late 1853, log houses stretched along roads through the Bear Creek Valley, along the Rogue River, west to the Upper Illinois River, and into the small interior valleys near the coast. Fiercely desiring to recreate their former homes and familiar landscapes, the settlers rapidly transformed what they perceived to be a wilderness. In 1854 and 1855, when U.S. government deputy surveyors ran township and donation land claim boundaries in the region, southwestern Oregon land could, for the first time, be owned and sold.

"While Indians had adapted to nature, these new inhabitants subdued it. Their livestock polluted the streams, broke down the banks, and destroyed native grasses such as Idaho fescue and bluestem. Farmers burned brush to clear fields for grazing stock; hunters unleashed fires and rarely bothered to extinguish them."

These irreconcilable differences led to the inevitable conflicts with both sides guilty of murders, rapes, and pillaging. In September 1853, near the Lower Table Rock (that overlooks the Rogue River close to Bear Creek's juncture), the parties agreed to a peace treaty, named the 1853 Council of Table Rock. This treaty with the Rogue River Indians opened the entire valley to increased settlement. It created a temporary reservation on the Rogue River's north side, which included Sams Valley, Sardine Creek, Evans Creek and the two Table Rocks. The agreement

promised the Indians certain goods and services so they could farm and ranch, along with a fort (Fort Lane), to protect--as Jeff LaLande writes--“the reservation’s inhabitants from land-hungry Whites.”

The peace was ruptured in October 1855 when a band of Jacksonville settlers and miners murdered 28 Takelma men, women, and children in a sneak attack; Indians killed a number of settlers over the next days in retaliation. This began the final installment of the “Rogue River Wars” in 1855-1856 between the U.S. Army, local volunteers, and militias, against the Native American tribes that were commonly grouped under the name of the Rogue River Indians.

The Takelma, however (and unlike the other Native tribes on the reserve), during this war primarily stayed on the reservation and at peace; numbers sought refuge and protection at Fort Lane. When the conflict had ended, the Takelma were removed in 1856 from their Rogue River Valley home to a reservation west of Salem, joining other tribes that were relocated over time from this region to other parts.

As LaLande observes: “After the 1856 defeat and near-total removal of the area’s Native peoples, Bear Creek Valley (for example) grew into southwestern Oregon’s wealthiest locale, and by 1887 the Southern Pacific Railroad followed its entire length.”

Sources: Kay Atwood & Dennis J. Gray, “Oregon History Project: New Names on the Land: Claiming the Land,” at [Native American Perspective](#); Jeff LaLande, “The Oregon Encyclopedia: Council of Table Rock,” at [Council of Table Rock](#).