

Tales of Oregon

by John Blalock

(This history is written about the Blalock family who lived in the early 1900s in the Brown School area. This article was typed as part of a technology class during the winter of 2003 by Nestucca Valley Middle School students Jenny D., Jerry G. and Nick and edited by Dean Bones.)

In 1914 ours was a happy family while we lived on Sunny Nook Farm on the north bank of the Nestucca River between Beaver and Blaine in Tillamook County, Oregon. We had a nice garden, a fine orchard and several mild cows. Any day we could catch all the fish we wanted from the river below the garden. In November one morning father got up early as usual to do the chores. He struck a match to find his boots in the closet.

When chores were over the family was seated at the table eating breakfast. Besides mother and father those there were my oldest sister, Cordia, almost 14 years old, my brother, Miles, just turned 12, and my sister, Ella, then 8 years old. While eating they suddenly heard a roaring noise and thinking it was an automobile the children rushed outside, but they immediately returned to say the house was on fire.

Mother, remembering the two babies upstairs asleep, rushed up the stairs without noticing the smoke and flames already coming through the steps. She grabbed up her two little boys, John, just turned 3, and Harold, almost 10 months old. With the two children in her arms she returned to the stairs, but it was all in flames.

As mother stood there thinking it was the end she heard father's voice calling, "Come to the window and drop the children out!" She immediately went to the window and raised the sash. When she did this the flames came rushing across the room and out the window. A celluloid comb in her hair caught fire and burned fiercely. She dropped us two boys into father's arms and climbed out the window which dropped down on her right arm. There she hung till father was able to help her down.

After we had watched the house burn to the ground we walked a mile down the road to Hiram Smith's place. He was a second cousin of mother's. There a doctor was called. Mother's face was badly burned, and skin grafts had to be done on her right arm. A spot on top of her head was bald thereafter, but her long hair kept it from being seen. I am always thankful for my mother's love. If it had not been for her, I would not be here today.

After the fire we stayed with relatives for a time till father had put up a temporary building on the farm. Then with donations from friends and borrowed money father was able to buy lumber and build a new house. All the outside was made of rough sawed board and batten as they call it, boards running up and down covered with batten over the cracks. There were two bedrooms down stairs, and a sitting room and kitchen also the pantry. Upstairs was one large, unfinished room where my brother and I had a bed at one end. A large bear skin lay on the floor beside our bed, a wonderful comfort to our feet when we had to get up on cold mornings.

There was a porch all the way across the front of the new house and another part way across the back. Mother loved flowers, and soon roses were blooming at the corners of the front porch, and roses climbed the west side of the house to the upstairs window. Flowers bordered the walkways and a large peony grew on each side of the front steps.

Father was a Baptist preacher, and he would usually be gone a couple of Sundays a month. He preached part time at Cloverdale, about 12 miles down the river, and part time at Sheridan out in the Willamette Valley, about 40 miles away by road. When he was going to Sheridan my brother, Miles, would go with him on horse back as far up the river as the horse could go, then he would walk the rest of the way over the coast range mountains to a friend's house near Sheridan where he would spend Saturday night. On Monday he would return, and Miles would meet him with the horse and bring him home. In summer, however, when the roads were good, he would often go the forty miles by road to Sheridan with a horse and buggy. Once I went with him in the buggy. While in Sheridan we each got studio pictures made. I still have copies of those pictures. I was 5 years old.

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Once our whole family went with father to Sheridan in our covered wagon. We had a Studebaker Wagon with large bows and a canvas cover made for it. This was necessary in that rainy country. That Saturday we did not make it all the way to Sheridan, and we camped on the banks of the South Yamhill River. My mother and two sisters with the baby slept in the wagon bed while Miles and I with father slept on the ground under a sheet of canvas stretched down at a slope from the sides of the wagon. The sounds of that night remain in my memory, especially the sound of an owl in trees nearby.

Sunday morning we were up early and made it to church in time for services. The old church building still stands. It was built in 1872 and is about 4 miles south west of Sheridan and one mile south of Highway 18 on Harmony Road. Surrounded by oak trees it sits in a pioneer cemetery. There are church services every second Sunday of the month.

Mother had one more child, a baby girl, Winona, born in 1916, then her health began to fail. Father decided to get a house in Tillamook to be near a doctor. We moved to Tillamook in September, 1917, traveling the 21 miles in our covered wagon. I always enjoyed traveling in the covered wagon, especially when I could sit up in the wagon seat with father and help call out to the horses, "Gittup, Maude! Gittup, Nell!" Of course father rode on the right side for there on the side of the wagon box was the big steel brake lever which was often used in that hilly country.

Near Tillamook the road followed a river for a mile or so, and there we saw ten or twelve covered wagons with horses unhitched and grazing. I had never seen anything like the covers on those wagons. They were so colorful. Also the people, who were preparing meals on campfires, were dressed in clothes of bright colors. I was frightened when my sister whispered to me that they were Gypsies and would steal little children.

I was to turn six in November, and mother wanted me to start to school, but because school had already started they would not accept me. Since mother was sick my brother, Harold, and I were left to play pretty much as we pleased. Not far away father had rented a building that was both a stable for the horses and a storage place for the wagon. The section where the wagon was backed in had a wide open front and a loft up high that came out about half way. A ladder up the wall led to the loft. In the rear the lean-to stable for the horses extended the building about twelve feet.

One day when father was gone with the wagon and team out to the farm, Harold and I were playing in the big open wagon shed. Harold climbed up the ladder to the loft where he found some pieces of old harness, and he began throwing those pieces down, stirring up the dust of the dirt floor, laughing as though it was great fun. Suddenly a voice from the wide open door called out, "You stop that!" We turned and saw a young girl standing in the doorway dressed in the bright clothes of a Gypsy.

"You take those things right back up there," she commanded. We two frightened little boys began to pick up the pieces of harness and carry them back up to the loft as fast as we could. When we were done we looked for the girl, but she was gone. Anyway I don't think the Gypsies were as dangerous as they were said to be.

The war was on in Europe by this time, and the country was being urged to save food so that plenty of food could be sent to our soldiers and allies. Herbert Hoover was in charge of sending these supplies to Europe, therefore the saving of food was called, "Hooverizing." A neighbor boy showed me how he would Hooverize. When he ate an apple he ate it core, seeds and all. I tried it, but I did not especially like it.

The doctor said that for mother's health we must leave Oregon and move to a warm, dry climate, so we made plans to move to Southern California. Our family, father, mother and six children, left Tillamook by train for Portland in February, 1918. In Portland we spent the night at the large Multnomah Hotel, then the next morning we boarded Cascade Limited bound for California.