

ONE OF THE FIRST IDAHO FARMERS TELLS ABOUT THE FIRST IDAHO FARMS

By WILLIAM J. MCCONNELL.

AS THE time is near at hand when you will issue your annual edition, presenting to your readers the marvelous growth of every industry within the borders of Idaho, but more especially the development of agriculture under the extensive irrigation systems made possible by a generous government, it might be of interest to your readers of the present generation to have placed in comparison with the story of today a brief sketch of the crude efforts of the early arrivals in Boise and Payette valleys of those who adopted farming or gardening as a means of making a livelihood.

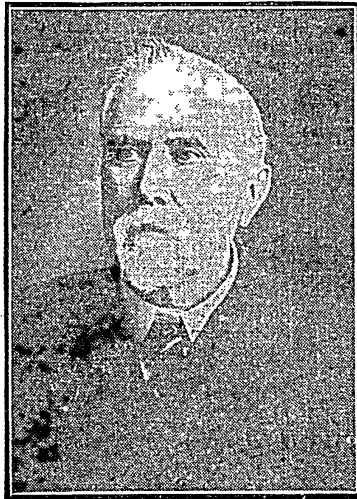
As is generally known, the primary cause of the rapid settlement of the valleys named and the country adjacent was the discovery of placer gold in Boise Basin late in the summer of 1862. During the following winter and early spring of 1863 many ranches were located in both valleys, although but few of those who located them did so with the intent of cultivating any part of the land. The keeping of roadhouses, horse ranches, or cutting hay along the river bottoms were the usual objects. In fact, most of those who located ranches could not have tilled the soil if they had desired to do so, there being no agricultural implements or seeds of any kind to be purchased at any price.

However, two outfits of emigrants, after journeying across the plains with teams and wagons, arrived at or near the present site of Boise, where, hearing of the discovery of gold in the Basin, they resolved to discontinue their journey and locate as near the new Eldorado as they could find land susceptible of being easily irrigated. Fortunately they had foresight enough to bring with them across the plains one plow in each outfit and a small quantity of garden seeds, and from one of the first pack trains arriving with supplies for the mines they were able to purchase a few potatoes, which they carefully hoarded for seed the following spring.

LOCATED AT JERUSALEM.

After having examined both Boise and Payette valleys for a suitable location, they determined that the latter afforded a better opportunity to secure water for irrigation. They accordingly moved their camp and outfit to that district above Horseshoe Bend since known as Jerusalem. One party, consisting of John Nicholson and J. C. Alford, located on a tract of land lying along the Payette river immediately below the mouth of what is now known as Brainard creek, from which water was easily and cheaply diverted for irrigation and domestic use. Nicholson and Alford were both bachelors, industrious, good citizens. They constructed a "dugout," in which they lived for three years. The other party, consisting of Camel and Hogan and Hogan's wife, located a tract of land on the creek named, there being plenty of water for both farms, or, more properly speaking, gardens. They, too, were desirable citizens. Both claims were fortunately located. The soil was a rich, sandy loam easily irrigated, and Placerville, which furnished an ample market, was only approximately 13 miles distant over a mountain trail, there being no wagon road into the Basin

One of the First Farmers of Idaho



HON. WILLIAM J. MCCONNELL,
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during the spring and early summer of 1863; all supplies were packed in on horses and mules.

I and my then partner, John H. Porter, arrived at Horseshoe Bend, on the Payette river, the 30th day of April, 1863, having started from Yamhill, Ore., on the first day of that month. We came to Idaho for the purpose of gardening, bringing with us six pack animals loaded with our little garden outfit. Portland at that time, as now, was the principal city in Oregon, and there we expected to be able to purchase a supply of garden seeds, but we were disappointed in one particular. It was our intention to plant a quantity of onion sets, but there were none in the Portland market. Fortunately, however, I had secured a small lot in the country before we started. We shipped our horses and supplies, including a plow, a pair of collars and hames, intending to use rope harness, to The Dalles, and there on the sandbar behind the old Umatilla House we packed all our six horses and walked to Idaho, arriving as stated on April 30. We located on a tributary of the Payette now known as Porter creek, and the next day, May 1, 1863, broke the first ground with a spade and planted a few onion sets we had brought from Yamhill.

LIVED IN A TENT.

With a ditch to bring water out of the creek and fences to build, we had no time to build a house, so we lived in a small tent for two seasons. In our efforts to garden we did as our neighbors—limited our efforts to what we could accomplish without hiring help. Consequently our garden the first year was small, smaller in fact than the gardens of those who located earlier on Brainard creek.

There were three gardens using water from that creek, Nicholson and Alford,

Hogan and Camel, and Tom Hill's, which with ours on Porter creek made four gardens to supply the needs of from fifteen to twenty-five thousand persons.

There were only two small gardens near Boise that year, the largest being in Stewart's gulch, and none others nearer than Walla Walla and Umatilla.

We gardeners were the first monopolists in Idaho, and if you have ever been informed that a farmer cannot enjoy a monopoly, your informant was not in Idaho, at least not in Boise Basin, at that time.

DOLLAR A BUNCH.

Four weeks after planting our onion sets we pulled them all, one Sabbath morning, and tied them in bunches, one dozen in a bunch. There proved to be one hundred bunches. I packed them into Placerville the same day and sold them for \$1 a bunch as rapidly as I could hand them out. They were the first green vegetables offered in the market. Early beets and turnips came in a little later, bringing in the open market 45 cents per pound, tops and all, the tops making most excellent greens. Green corn was marketed at \$2 per dozen ears; cucumbers, \$2 per dozen; tomatoes, 35 cents per pound; potatoes, 35 cents.

The advent of the first pack train load of watermelons into Idaho City was an epoch in its early history not to be forgotten by at least one young man, who purchased one of the largest and most luscious of the melons. A wagon road had been constructed up More creek from Boise valley, and among the first patrons of the road were two emigrant wagons owned by a sturdy Missourian and his family, the outfit having recently completed the trip across the plains. The family consisted of the husband and wife and two grown daughters. They made a temporary camp on Buena Vista bar and erected their tent, but two gallant young miners who occupied a log cabin nearby, proffered to give up their cabin to the family and they would occupy the tent. Accordingly the transfer was made, and as probably was anticipated, friendly and pleasant relations were established.

A WATERMELON DEAL.

I appeared on the scene with my watermelons and was halted within a short distance of the cabin which had been surrendered to the family and was soon surrounded by a clamorous crowd, all of whom wanted to buy a melon. The attention of the girls having been attracted, they implored one of the young men to buy them a melon. "Certainly," he responded, and immediately ran out crying, "Hey there, Cap, bring us in a melon." I selected a large one and delivered it at once. He asked the price and I informed him 25 cents per pound—the weight was marked on the rind. It weighed 32 pounds, hence the price was \$8.

The girls were shocked, and I presume the young man was jarrd, but at that price for melons, 25 cents per pound, they were the least profitable of any product of the farm, owing to the loss in breakage while packing. The foregoing prices appear fabulous today but it must not be forgotten that everything else

was proportionately high. Sixteen dollars per sack of 50 pounds of flour was the normal price for two years. Slough grass hay was retailed at the feed yard for 25 cents per pound.

The second year, 1864, marked a notable increase in the acreage placed under cultivation along the tributaries of the Payette.

WHY PAYETTE VALLEY FAVORED.

Farming or gardening from the beginning was more extensively carried on near the Payette than the Boise river, for the reason that there were no tributary streams entering the Boise which could be diverted for irrigation except More creek, and owing to that stream being from the first the tail race for all the placer mines within the Basin, it was unfit for agricultural or domestic use.

During the summer of 1863 several farms were located on Squaw creek in the vicinity of where the village of Sweet is now situated, while on what was called the Upper Squaw creek, near the crossing of the Brownlee trail, Dow Newman and Reube Brown located a hay ranch, and for several years brought the baled hay into Placerville where they conducted a feed yard.

During October and November, 1865, I fed a pack train in their yard two nights each week, paying 12½ cents per pound for hay, equal to two hundred and fifty dollars per ton. Dow Newman afterward moved to Ketchum and kept a livery stable, while Reube Brown located and kept a stable at Shoshone. There are many persons yet living who knew them well.

PLAGUE OF JERUSALEM.

During the summer of 1865, the farmers in Jerusalem met their Waterloo. From the first we had been annoyed by crickets, but during 1863 we suffered but little damage. In 1864 they were more plentiful but we managed to shoo them off without material injury to our crops, but early in the summer of 1865 they returned in legions. We had sown two thousand pounds of wheat that spring, for which we paid 12½ cents per pound in La Grande, Ore., and an additional 12½ cents per pound to have it delivered at Bluff station on the Payette. From there we hauled it home with our own team.

We also planted that spring three hundred pounds of onion sets, having bought two hundred pounds of the lot from Dan Stewart, paying him therefor one dollar per pound, considering ourselves lucky to get them.

At first the crickets while young did not seem to relish the growing wheat, but they took kindly to our barley, and the onions they considered a luxury. They not only ate the tops but they stood on their heads and explored the pith. They attacked the wheat when it was beginning to head and in three days it was utterly destroyed. Fortunately we were well supplied with water, and employing a force of men we constructed a ditch around the field where we had planted our potatoes, corn and vines, and by keeping it continually patrolled we managed to save that portion of our crop, but our neighbors were less fortunate, and we were the only gardeners who had vegetables to deliver from Jerusalem that year, consequently the others became discouraged and sold their holdings for what they were offered and abandoned the country.

A CERTAIN CROP FROM EARLIEST DAYS OF IDAHO TO THE PRESENT

