



Sunday, March 21, 2010

Pendleton 1910: Dynamic, diverse and divided

By Ronald Woodbury

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Editor's note: The following is excerpted from a talk Ronald Woodbury gave yesterday at the 100th anniversary celebration of the First Christian Church's current building. His information comes from the Pendleton Public Library, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation and Round-Up.

Pendleton in 1910 was dynamic, diverse and divided.

At the bottom of white society, it was saloons, brothels, fleabag hotels, and gambling parlors. Outside of town it was a society of hunting and gathering Indians and small ranchers and farmers struggling just above the hard scrabble existence of the cowboy. Underground, Pendleton was Chinese.

At the top, a strong corps of merchants and industrialists made Pendleton the railroad, distribution, trade and processing center of Eastern Oregon. Wealthy wheat farmers "removed" their families to Pendleton to get better schooling for their children. In the middle, storekeepers, the professions, and a modest working class found their place.

According to the Census of 1910, 4,460 lived in town but the Chinese were rarely counted. Fewer than a thousand Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla Indians lived on the reservation.

For the Indians, salmon fishing still thrived under Treaty rights undiminished by giant dams, but federal law and policy had usurped most Indian Treaty land and enabled intentional cultural destruction.

The primary instrument of destruction was forced removal of all Indian children from their families to schools as far away as Salem. There the children were to be transformed into citizens of a white society which could never see beyond the color of their skin.

The Chinese, barred from citizenship and banned from immigration, ran restaurants and laundries but at night stayed below ground to avoid drunken cowboys hankering for an easy victim. Attracted to the West to mine and build railroads, the Chinese were gradually leaving Eastern Oregon for opportunities in bigger cities.

In 1909, with a \$30,000 pledge from local business leaders, Pendleton enticed the Bishop family to take over the defunct Pendleton Woolen Mills. With 1.5 million sheep in Eastern Oregon, by 1910, Pendleton was back in business as one of the top wool markets in the country.

Pendleton Roller Mills could produce a thousand barrels of Byers' Blue Ribbon Flour per day. There were several cigar factories!

Pendleton was a city of lodges and secret societies: Masonic, Odd Fellows, Knights of Pythias, Workmen, Woodmen, Royal Arcanum, Knights of the Maccabees, Fraternal Union, P.P.O. Elks, Eastern Star, Degree of Honor, Ladies of the Maccabees, United Artisans, Red Men, Pioneers of the Pacific, Native Sons of Oregon and Women of Woodcraft.

Although Portland, with 100,000 people, was indisputably Oregon's largest city, Pendleton, it was argued, was the second city of Oregon by way of permanent family population, beating out towns with more transient populations in Astoria (fishermen), Baker City (miners), and Salem (legislative hangers-on).

Pendleton had electricity, both for street and house illumination. It claimed the best fire department on the Pacific coast. The state made it a crime to play games of chance such as poker, faro, craps and twenty-one "for lucre," to operate nickel-in-the-slot machines, or to maintain "bawdy houses," but the practice was for "entrepreneurs" to pay a monthly "fine" personally to the city marshal for a "license" to operate!

Pendleton winters were considered "genial" for their lack of cold and snow. No snow plow then either! But Pendleton's current-era water slide would have been nice for all the 100-degree days!

City water, pumped directly from the river to a reservoir full of dead animals, tasted like sewage. Not surprisingly, lots of people died of typhoid fever that summer.

Last but far from least, in 1910, after the searing summer heat of its 1909 rodeo experiment, Pendleton settled on September for its world-famous Round-Up. It would be very hard to live in Pendleton today and not know of this year's 100th anniversary celebration.

There is a Round-Up story to be told - of triumph and tragedy, of race and sex and reconciliation, of cowboy and Indian traditions in a changing society. But that story is not for here or now. For now it is to remember our past - dynamic, diverse, and divided as it may be - and consider what it tells us of our present and our future.

Ronald Woodbury has a Ph.D. in history and economics. Following a career in college teaching and administration, he and his wife retired to Pendleton where their daughter lives with her husband and four children. Ron is an Elder at First Christian Church and Coordinator of Elder Mediation for Blue Mountain Mediation.