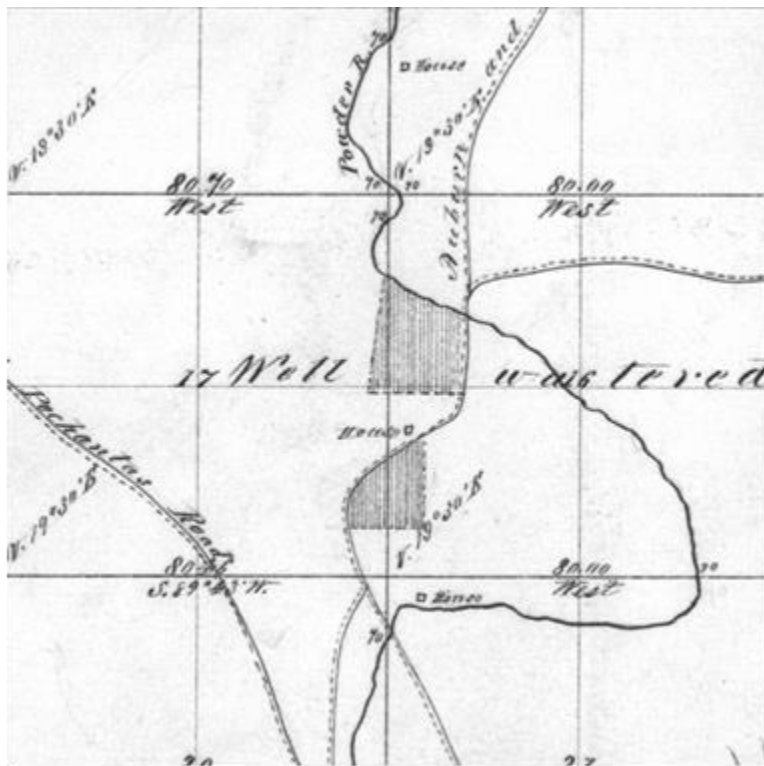


Who was Geiser Pollman?
A Short History of Baker City's Public Park
by
Gary Dielman

In the spring of 1862, Royal A. Pierce, a young lawyer, and his wife, Elizabeth Ann Turk Pierce, and their three young children left Wisconsin for Oregon. Arriving at Oregon's border in early September via the Tim Goodall Trail, their wagon train crossed Snake River at Brownlee, climbed the difficult trail to Pine Valley, then on to Powder Valley and Auburn. Three years later the family moved to infant Baker City. In 1864 Royal platted the land that became Baker City's core business district.



This June 1864 government surveyor map shows future site of Baker City. Between the two cultivated fields the surveyor wrote "House" and a square to denote the Evans/Fisher cabin. Powder River, seen here flowing east, probably due to spring flooding, was later routed to flow only through the center of town.

In a 1912 interview, Elizabeth recalled Baker City as it existed three years prior to settlement. She said that upon arrival in Baker Valley on their way to Auburn, she and Royal "camped on the west side of the river, just opposite to the present city park, where they rested a few days." She remembers, "There was then one little log cabin, where Baker stands, on the river bank near the site of the present

greenhouse.” The cabin belonged to a “Mr. Evans, who operated a sort of saloon and provision store.” [Author’s note: For many years there was a greenhouse on the ground now occupied by Baker County Library.]

Elizabeth’s memory is supported by an 1862 map of the future Baker City area drawn by a government surveyor. On the map in the area where Elizabeth’s party camped the surveyor drew a small square representing a cabin with a few acres of cultivated land both north and south of it. The only other habitation noted on the map was a cabin near the present location of the Les Schwab store on Bridge Street. The cabin belonged to a man named Place, who collected toll on a road he owned coming from Auburn.



*Fisher’s/Rust’s Grove (center) on the east bank of Powder River.
At the NW corner of the grove is the Campbell Street bridge.
This is a detail of a scale drawing of Baker City ca. 1890.*

Evans may have been the first person to occupy land at the site of present-day Geiser-Pollman Park. Evans apparently moved on, because a man named Fisher lived in the cabin during the early years of Baker City. A dense grove of cottonwood trees across the river to the east of his cabin went by the name Fisher’s Grove. After Fisher, too, moved on, the stand of trees acquired the name Rust’s Grove, named in honor of the land’s new owner, German brewer Henry Rust. We don’t know much more about Baker City’s first residents, Evans, Fisher, and Place. But Rust remained in Baker City until his death in 1907.

Born in Bavaria in 1835, Rust came to the U. S. shortly before the outbreak of the Civil War. After being seriously wounded, he became a quartermaster rising to the rank of captain. Coming west after the end of the war, Rust and a partner started a brewery in the mining camp of Clarksville in southern Baker County near Bridgeport. In 1875 he established the Pacific Brewery in Baker City on land presently occupied by U. S. National Bank. Adjacent to his brewery he built an opera house, which was the center of entertainment in Baker City until it burned in 1898. He subsequently sold the land to Carl Adler, father of Leo, and partners, who built two multi-story buildings, which were torn down in the 1960's to make room for the present bank.

During the mining boom at the end of the 19th century, Rust's Grove remained a relatively untouched island of nature, as the hamlet of Baker City grew into a prosperous center of commerce and culture dubbed "Queen of the Inland Empire." The grove's central location just a couple of blocks from the city's main intersection at Front and Center streets (later renamed Main and Broadway) made Rust's Grove a serene respite from the hustle and bustle of city life. Pedestrians strolling through the grove soon wore paths that meandered between the cottonwoods. With the addition of some benches, the grove started taking on the air of a park. But its location made it vulnerable to a river with a shallow channel.



*Geiser-Pollman Park during the February 1957 flood.
Powder River is seen flowing full just behind the line of evergreen trees,
present site of Baker County Library.
Band shell is the white building at left center.*

In mid-January 1894 in the depths of a cold winter that locked Powder River in ice, the warming winds of a Chinook wind swept through the area melting snow and ice upstream causing a sudden rise in the river. Waters flowed under and

over the river's thick ice, which began to float and break up. The *Morning Democrat* of January 16 reported:

“The thaw and Chinook of the past two days resulted in a phenomenal rise of the waters of Powder river and yesterday morning the northern portion of the city, or that portion adjacent to the river from Center street to below Campbell street, was a sea of water and ice. Yards were overflowed and cellars and basements were filled with water. The residences of Messrs. C. Dilsheimer, M. Weil, William Jenkins, Mose Fuchs and George Campbell were entirely surrounded by water and from an early hour yesterday morning men were at work clearing the gorges in the river formed by floating ice. Giant powder was used to break the ice and it was several hours before the overflow was checked. For a time it looked like the bridges crossing the river would be washed away and it was only by energetic work that they were saved. The Rust park had the appearance of a scene in Alaska, ice being piled up in every direction.”



These matching houses, owned by Max Weil and Carl Dilsheimer, located on the east side of Resort St., present site of Baker County Library, were moved to 2305 2nd and 2337 2nd after the January 1894 flood.

Dilsheimer and Weil, both with businesses on Front Street, lived in matching houses at on the east side of Resort Street, present site of Baker County Library. The large Fuchs residence sat on the northeast corner of Front and Campbell, Papa Murphy's today. Jenkins operated a stable on the north side of Campbell Street, and George Campbell also lived on the street named for him. Not wishing to repeat the experience, both Dilsheimer and Weil moved their houses to opposite ends of the 2300 block of Second Street. The Dilsheimer house didn't escape destruction, for it burned in 1906. Dilsheimer replaced it with a much larger residence, today's Bootsma home at 2337 2nd Street.

The *Morning Democrat* article may have been the first use in writing of the name “Rust park.” But it wasn’t officially a park yet. In the first years of the new century, though, citizens were feeling like their town ought to have an established park. The town had a population near 7,000, the largest town in Eastern Oregon. In the last two decades of the 19th century, brick and stone buildings replaced the fire-prone wooden ones up and down Front Street. The next building boom benefited Court, Valley, and First streets. Between 1901 and 1909 impressive structures made of Pleasant Valley tuff stone and brick were erected: Jett Building at Valley and 1st (1901), Baker City Hall (1903), St. Francis Academy (1905), Elks Lodge on Court (1905), I.O.O.F. on Valley (1907), St. Francis Cathedral (1908), and Baker County Courthouse (1909). City officials forced a half dozen small one-story frame brothels located south of the Antlers Hotel to move their 1st Street businesses elsewhere to make way for the upscale, new brick telephone office (1906) and three tuff stone buildings: Shoemaker (1906), Rand (1906), and Pythian Castle (1908).



Geiser-Pollman Park, ca. 1910

As Baker City grew, citizens wanted the amenities of a large city. After Rust’s Opera House burned in 1898, the huge brick Baker City Opera House was built at the northeast corner of Front and Church streets. In 1900 wives of Baker City’s most prominent business and professional men founded the Alpha Literary Club, which promoted the formation of a library. They started with a reading room in the Citizens Bank Building. In 1903 the infant library moved into City Hall shortly after its construction offering a collection of 1,500 volumes. In 1907 Baker City began negotiations with the Carnegie Foundation to get money for a library building, which in 1909 resulted in construction of the dignified Carnegie Library next door to City Hall.

Baker City was becoming such a rising star in Oregon that in 1906 two Baker City officials, Mayor Charles A. Johns, a lawyer, and Sheriff Harvey K. Brown, were unsuccessful candidates for the Republican nomination for governor.

Such an important city needed a park. In January 1906 the *Morning Democrat*, no doubt impressed with the Alpha Literary Club's success in establishing a public library, suggested in an editorial that the club take on getting a public park for the city. In February the club discussed the suggestion but decided it wasn't in a position to take the project on. But just a month later a park was back on the club's agenda. A fund of \$1,285 for acquisition of property was raised, but there was no consensus on where it should be located.



Geiser-Pollman Park, ca. 1910

One suggestion was a site at the depot, since it would give travelers “a favorable impression of Baker.” The *Baker City Herald* did not favor locating a park on an undeveloped tract with no trees, promoting, instead, “Rust grove on the east side of the river. This plot of land, although small, is well watered with shade trees and with a little work could be put in very good condition and would be a park at once without having to wait for the trees to grow.”

No official action was taken on the park issue for another two years, but the desire to have a public park remained. In June 1908 an anonymous park “booster” in a letter to the editor of the *Morning Democrat* suggested two sites, one of them quite novel.

“Rust’s grove,” the booster wrote, “is level and furnishes abundant shade, and reservoir hill is less than a quarter of a mile from Main street where everybody goes to enjoy the mountain breeze and view the city below.” (The writer was referring to the Spring Garden Street hill, site of the city’s first reservoir).

The booster continued, “A park commencing about where the Smith ditch enters the tunnel, and reaching around and over the hill, and embracing the cliffs on the east side, could easily be made very beautiful. It would be the best of advertising for the town, as it could be seen by passers on all trains. This could all be watered by the city reservoir. A fountain situated on top of the hill, with the water trickling over the rocks to the depths below, would be scenery unequaled. Nearly all this land is used only for dry pasture at the present time and much of it could be bought at option for a reasonable sum.”

Smith Ditch, notorious recently for having broken above Spring Garden Street flooding much of the neighborhood in water and inches of mud, had just been constructed from the upper end of Bowen Valley to north of the road to Richland. The project included construction of Smith Lake, located a half-mile east of Baker City. Developers had ambitious plans to make the Sunnyslope area into “apple, peach, apricot, and cherry” orchards, including “winter banana trees,” and to develop a park around 240-acre Smith Lake. “Can you imagine a more appropriate pleasure resort for Baker City?” asked the *Baker City Herald* in May 1908. Developers finished Smith Ditch, but their plans for orchards and park never made it to fruition.

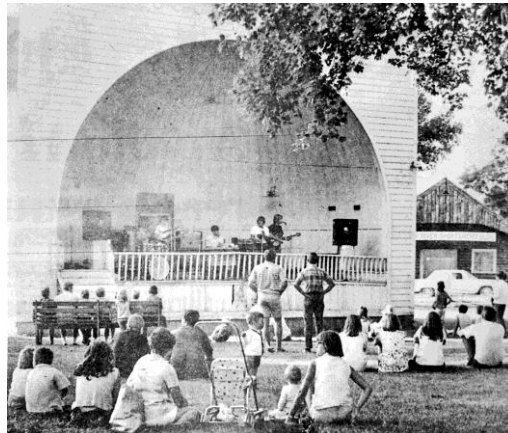


Geiser-Pollman Park, ca. 1910

But in the summer of 1908 plans for a Baker City public park began to bloom. City officials had finally made a decision: the park should be located at Rust’s Grove. There remained a final hurdle, which was finding money for purchase of the land bounded by Powder River, Madison, Grove, and Campbell streets, which had been platted for streets and lots but not yet developed. But the owners wanted a total of \$7,000. Although the city was sitting on a park fund of \$1,800 dollars, city council was not willing or able to come up with the balance.

This is where the names Geiser and Pollman come into the story.

The story is well known that John Geiser made his fortune by loaning the owners of the Bonanza Mine \$2,000. In 1890, when the note came due and the owners could not pay, Geiser was awarded ownership of the mine. In 1897, after operating the mine profitably for seven years, Geiser sold it for the tidy sum of \$500,000. John died leaving his fortune (equivalent to \$12,000,000 today) to his wife, Eliza, and their five children: Albert, Louisa, Emma, Frank, and Edward. The Geiser family home, which burned about three years ago, was at 2405 Second Street. (Owner John Fuzi finished restoring the Geiser house in 2012.)



*Band shell in Geiser-Pollman Park, ca. 1970.
Powder River Sportsmen's Club in background across Campbell St.*

Emma Geiser married Baker City businessman William Pollman in 1896 making their first home at 1615 Washington Street. Pollman, the son of German immigrants, grew up in Kansas working in his father's meat market. In 1889 he came west to Baker City, where he worked in the Geddes and Kraft butcher shop and soon became partner, when he bought out Kraft's interest. Pollman's interests expanded into the financial realm in 1905, when he became president of the fledgling Baker Loan & Trust Co., predecessor of Pioneer Federal Savings and Loan. Pollman was also president of the Bank of Haines and secretary-manager of Baker Gas & Electric Co.

In 1906 the Pollmans purchased the Bella Kadish home at 2406 2nd Street, distinguished by its carriage house/maid's quarters at the back of the lot and a fur locker in the basement of the main residence. Another distinguishing feature was its location just across the street from Emma's home.

In 1897 the Geiser family purchased the Warshauer Hotel renaming it Geiser Grand Hotel. The Geisers and Pollmans, together and separately, financed the construction of several of Baker City's Main Street buildings: Pollman Building on the southeast corner of Main and Broadway; Geiser Building on the southwest

corner of Main and Broadway; and the Geiser-Pollman Building on Main Street just south of the Geiser Building.

It's obvious these two families were very wealthy. With focus on the Geisers and the Pollmans, the reader has no doubt figured out the answer to the question posed in the title of this article and where the rest of this story is going.

On September 3, 1908, newspapers proclaimed in headlines, "Baker Now Has a Public Park" and "New Public Park at Rust's Grove" and "Tract of Five Acres Became the Property of City Today." But the newspapers could not write the end of the story. The newspapers reported that "two citizens" had acquired the land from six landowners, who collectively, it was rumored, had wanted \$7,000 for the land. And the newspapers knew that "two citizens" had transferred the land to the city for use as a park. As to who the mystery citizens were, the *Morning Democrat* reported, "Don't ask us who gave the park to Baker City. We don't know."

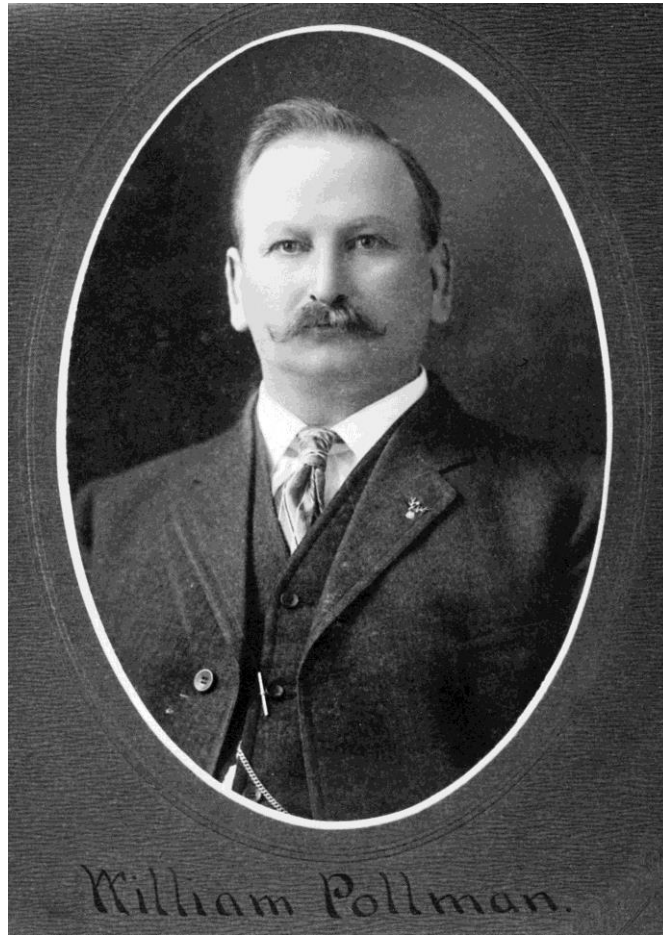


Band shell in Geiser-Pollman Park July 4, 1950.
Site of the July 4, 1950, convention
of the Baker County Pioneers Association.

And this writer doesn't know how long the "two citizens" remained anonymous. It is known, however, that a month later newspapers were reporting that William Pollman was running for the office of Mayor of Baker City, a position he handily won in the November 1908 election. One might surmise that word got out fairly soon after the gift of Rust's Grove to Baker City that Pollman was one of the donors, which certainly would have been a boon to his chances for victory in the election.

Recently this writer came into possession of a copy of the deed that transferred the Rust's Grove area to Baker City. It came from Bill Geddes of La Grande,

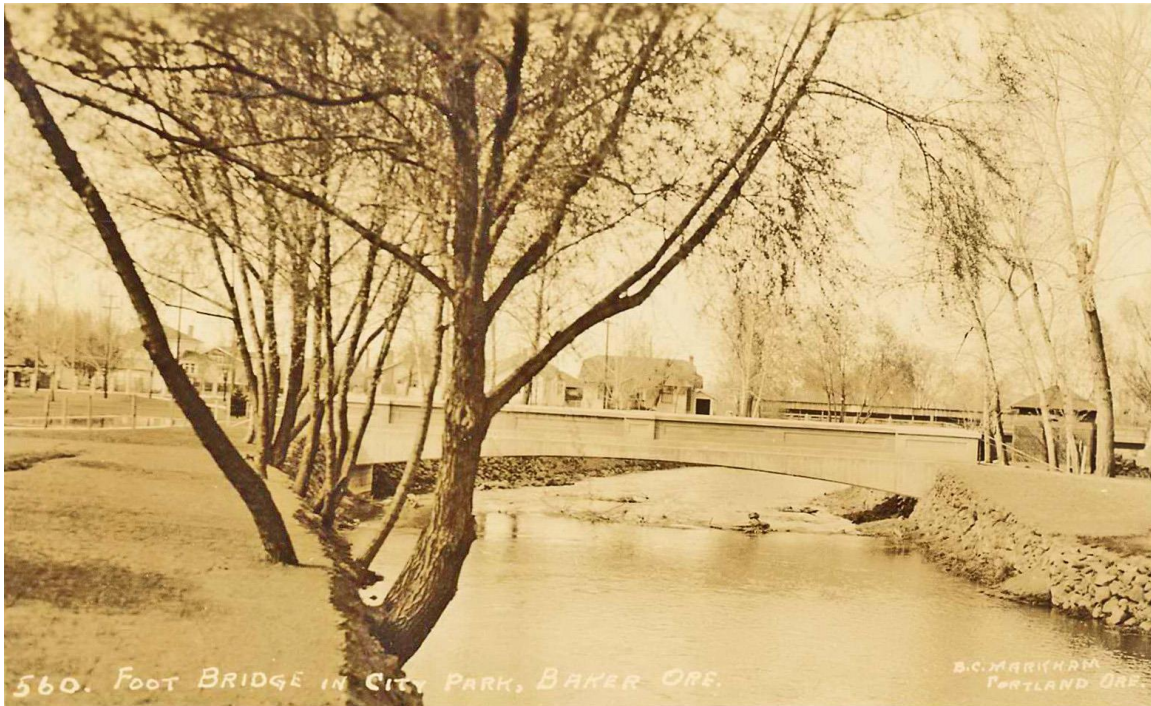
great-grandson of Joseph Geddes, partner with William Pollman in the butcher shop and other enterprises. Here's what the deed reveals.



In 1908, William Pollman, wife Emma, and her sister, Louisa Geiser, bought Rust's Grove and sold it to Baker City for \$1.00 on condition it be used as a park.

Donors were William and Emma Pollman and Emma's sister, Louisa Geiser, who, as noted above, lived across the street from each other. They purchased the land on September 2, 1908, from E.F. Eppinger, George Chandler, Luella Ingersol, J.H. Donald, and J.H. Graham. The city acquired the land from the three donors for \$1.00 apiece with these conditions: 1. "the large trees now standing in what is known as Rust's Grove shall be kept and maintained as they now are until such time as there is ample shade provided"; and 2. "should the City fail or neglect to expend on the said park the sum of Six Hundred Dollars for maintenance for any one year, that the title to the said property...shall revert to the grantors." The deed was signed on September 3, 1908, by Louisa Geiser, Emma Pollman, and William Pollman and notarized by Charles A. Johns, notary and also Mayor of Baker City.

By September 9, Mayor Johns had appointed a four-member park board to arrange for immediate clearing of brush and rubbish in preparation for a gardener to begin work. "The matter of a suitable name for the park," reported the *Baker City Herald*, "was discussed but no decision was reached as to what the name shall be." This writer does not know when that decision was made, but today everyone knows our public park by the hyphenated name "Geiser-Pollman Park" in honor of the two donor families. (So now we know who that guy Geiser Pollman was.)



*Foot bridge over Powder River at Geiser-Pollman Park.
Two matching ponds on the west side of the river made of concrete with a fence
around their perimeters (see one pond middle left) were removed
when Baker County Library was built in 1970.*

There are two more little chapters in the story of Geiser-Pollman Park.

In 1919 the park grew in size by about one-third, when the city acquired the land west of Powder River now occupied by Baker County Library. The block had been the site of a greenhouse in the early 1900's. Then for many years it lay vacant. In this writer's youth in the late '40s and early '50s, tall trees shaded a lawn bordered on three sides by the same chain and concrete post fence around today's park. The area contained no playground apparatus, just a shallow lily pad pond in a rectangular, concrete basin surrounded by an iron fence in the north half. Besides lily pads the pond contained small snails, frogs, and the long

water weed (elodea) people collected for their aquariums. In the riprap river bank on the north half was a stairway leading to the river allowing easy access to rocks that boys turned over to catch crawdads hiding underneath with which they delighted in chasing girls. Such play usually didn't end well for the crawdads.

In February 1957 history repeated itself when a Chinook blew through the area creating great ice jams in Powder River and huge blocks of ice riding high on a channel-filling torrent piled up against city bridges turning the whole city park into a lake as well as much of the area all the way north to Wingville Road. The governor of Oregon activated the local National Guard unit (Co. F), of which this writer was a member, to fight the flood. A similar flood happened several years later.

The final chapter in this short history of Geiser-Pollman Park concerns the loss of the west portion between the river and Resort Street added to the park in 1919. In 1969 Baker City residents voted 1188 to 112 to donate that portion for a new library. Reminders of the time when the area was a park are the stately trees still standing on the north end of the well-gardened library grounds.

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