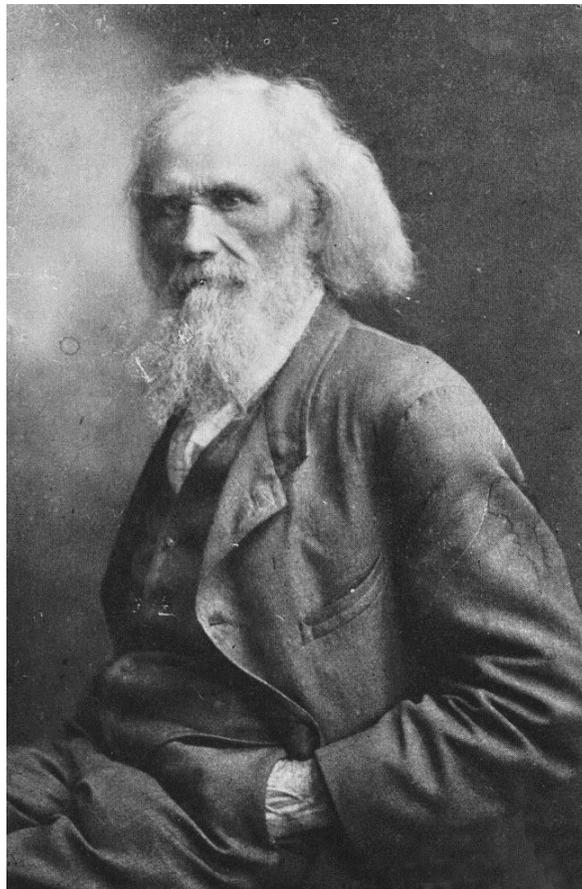


Ezra Meeker in Baker City:
1906 and 1910
by
Gary Dielman

Upon arrival in Baker City in April 1910, Ezra Meeker stopped in at J.W. Wisdom & Co. Drugs on the southwest corner of Main and Valley, the store of druggist John Wisdom. Wisdom had befriended Meeker on his first “expedition,” as Meeker called it, through Baker City in April 1906. The men shared a common bond: they were both true pioneers of the Oregon Trail. And with their long, gray beards they even looked alike, although Meeker at 76 had ten years on Wisdom, and they both lived almost 100 years.

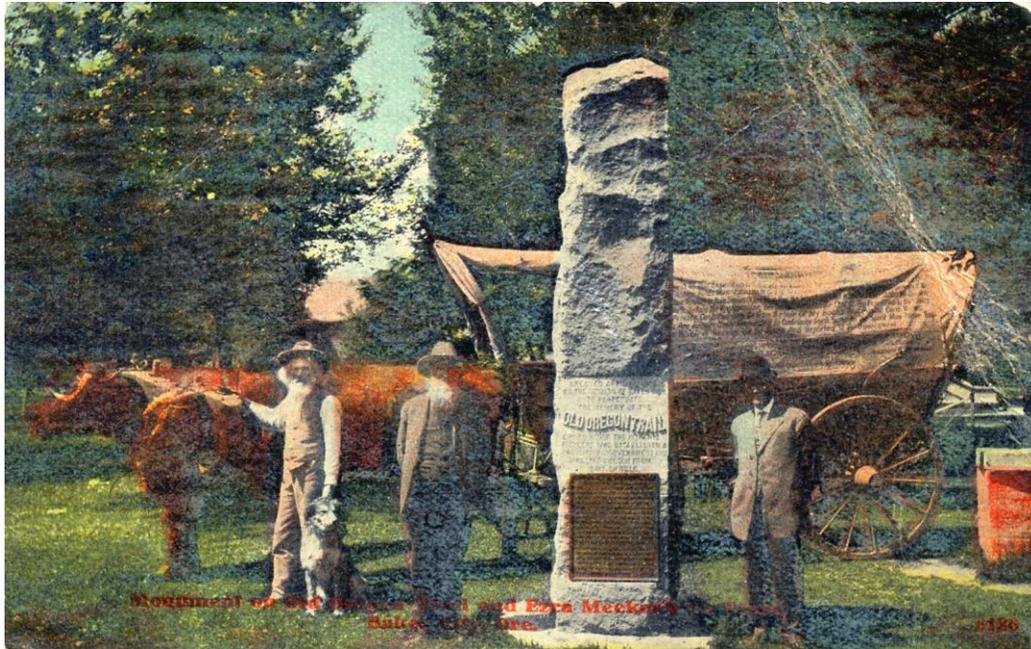


Ezra Meeker

In 1852, Meeker (1830-1928) had migrated on the Oregon Trail from Ohio to Puyallup, Washington, where he became a successful hop grower. Wisdom (1840-1938), coming from Missouri, had arrived in Powder River Valley on September 6, 1862, “a land the likes of which I had never seen,” he wrote in his memoirs. “Here is where I am going to live!” he told himself. “That night we

camped on the bank of Powder River just below where the Campbell Street bridge is now.”

Years later, Wisdom’s daughter Loy in her biography of her father, “John William Wisdom, Pioneer,” remembered Meeker’s 1910 visit. “Ezra Meeker stopped off to see Father. They had their pictures taken together at the pioneer monument on the high school grounds (present middle school). Father sent word to Mother to expect a guest for dinner. Mother just calmly killed another chicken and shared with Mr. Meeker the same meal she had planned for the family.”



*Ezra Meeker (hand on ox), John Wisdom, and J.A. Churchill.
Photo taken in 1910 on Meeker’s second trip through Baker City,
as evidenced by the bronze plaque funded by children’s donations and
not attached until after Meek left town in 1906.*

The “monument” Loy referred to was the reason for Meeker’s previous presence in Baker City in 1906. Meeker had taken it upon himself to rescue the Oregon Trail from oblivion. In the sixty-three years since the first wagon train traveled the full length of the Oregon Trail in 1843, its traces were rapidly disappearing, obliterated by human activity or reclaimed by the forces of nature. In February 1906, Meeker acquired a sturdy covered wagon, two powerful oxen, and with single-minded determination set off from his home with a plan to travel the Oregon Trail in reverse.

Along the way Meeker solicited donations from citizens he encountered to fund the ambitious enterprise. With the contributions he purchased small stones to mark the trail where it intersected main traveled routes and larger stones for monuments, which were erected in towns on or near the Oregon Trail.

Meeker's grand plan was not infrequently met with apathy. But in Eastern Oregon, Meeker's campaign resulted in the successful erection of Oregon Trail monuments at The Dalles, Pendleton, La Grande, Baker City, Straw Ranch—here the trail left Alder Creek and headed over the hill to Virtue Flat—Durkee, Huntington, and Vale. Smaller markers were set at Meacham, lower Ladd Canyon, upper Ladd Canyon, Flagstaff Hill, and Jett farm near Lime. Both Ladd Canyon markers and the Jett marker have disappeared.

Meeker did not travel alone. He was assisted by a hired man, William Mardon, who served as driver, cook, and general handyman. Although Meeker rode in his covered wagon, quite often he traveled ahead via train to scout out the location of the trail and conduct fund raising in towns along its path.



In 1906 Baker citizens gathered on 4th St. in front of Old Central School for the dedication of Baker City's Oregon Trail Monument. Ezra Meeker is at lower right holding bouquet.

Meeker's first stop in Baker County was at Slough House, owned by farmer Jonathan Parker. Meeker wrote in his journal on April 13, 1906, "This is a famous camping ground for the immigrants, 12 miles south easterly from North Powder." (Today nothing but a few foundation stones remain of Slough House, which was located on West Frontage Road just south of the present Colton and Warner ranches.) Meeker wanted to set a marker at that location, but owner Parker "was silent," when Meeker hit him up for a contribution.

However, Parker treated Meeker "courteously," and "on April 14 Mr. & Mrs. Parker drove me in their spring wagon 8 miles to this city (Baker City) where we

arrived at 10 o'clock. The ox team following leisurely arrived at 2 p.m. Found that the town was ripe for erecting a monument, although (Baker City is) 6 miles westerly from the trail."

Meeker was delighted with Baker City's reception of his trail-marking expedition. On April 15 he wrote to a friend, "Before the end of this week there will be a memorial granite shaft 10 feet long and 2 x 2 square dedicated here and then my cup of joy will be full; this of course is far and away beyond my most sanguine expectation."



Meeker and Churchill stand beside Oregon Trail Monument, while William Mardon, Meeker's driver, tends to the oxen. Old Central School on 4th St. is behind.

The reason for Meeker's glee was his success in obtaining enough contributions to fund a monument of such large dimensions. Meeker wrote, "I am greatly under obligation to John Wisdom, druggist, who went with me to solicit contributions, and Prof. (Julius A.) Churchill, superintendent of public schools, for their admiral aid. Had it not been for their help, I doubt if there would have been as pronounced success."

During his week in Baker City, Meeker received donations from adults, usually fifty cents or a dollar, including \$35.00 from the Commercial Club, totaling \$155.00.

(In today's dollars the equivalent would be between \$3,000 and \$4,500. However, an Iowa dealer in grave markers told me a granite monument that size today would cost between \$50,000 and \$80,000 dollars. My measurement of Baker City's Old Oregon Trail monument, which today stands in the middle of Geiser-Pollman Park, reveals its dimensions to be ten feet six inches tall by twenty-six inches wide by twenty-four inches deep. Given granite's specific gravity of 2.91 times the density of water, the monument weighs about 7,600 pounds.)

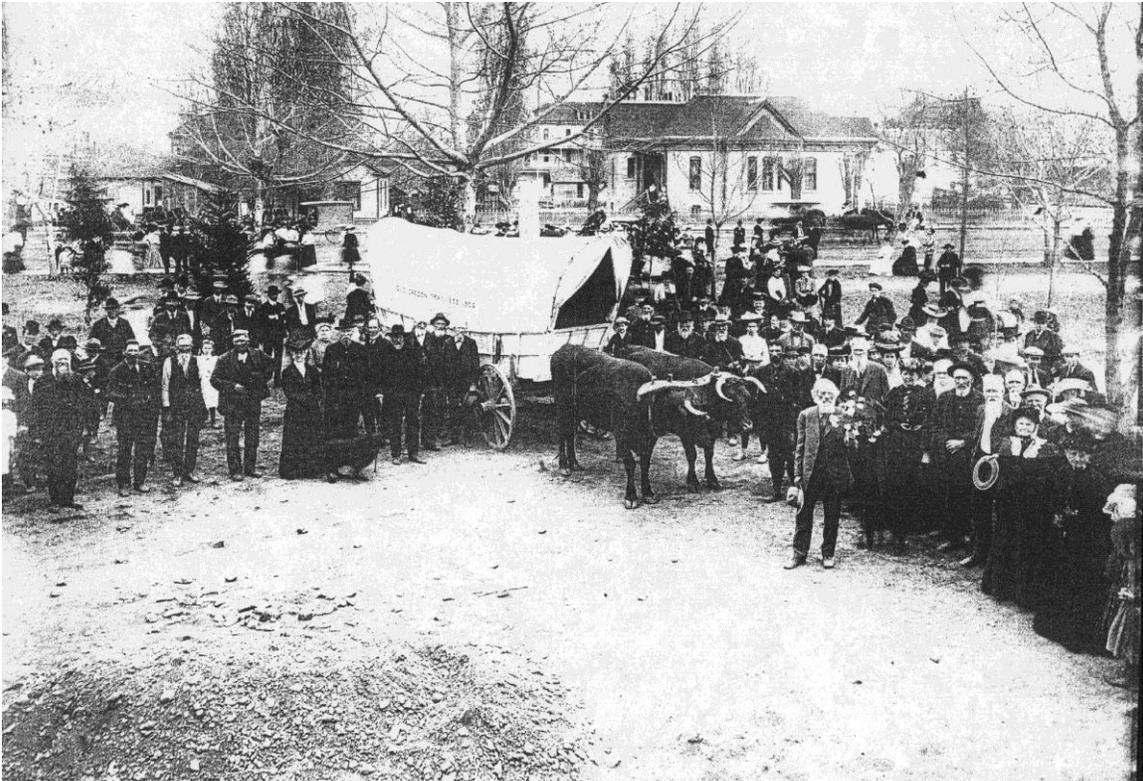


Ezra Meeker in 1910 on his second fund-raising trip to Baker City. His wagon is parked on Valley St. just west of Main St., from which he is selling his books about the Oregon Trail to raise money for more trail monuments.

In his daily journal, Meeker recorded all the names of adult donors and amount donated. Here's a sampling of the many names: Gerson Neuberger, who many will remember worked in the Neuberger-Heilner store until his death in the 1960's; Louis Freitag, a jeweler well known as leader of the Baker City Band; Charles I. Flynn, cigar maker; Matilda Grier, widow of stable owner Sylvester Grier; Roland Parker, photographer who took the photos of Meeker at the monument dedication ceremony; William Pollman, First National Bank president and mayor of Baker City; Charles M. Foster, for many years Baker County's elected surveyor; Wallace W. Travillion, Baker County Judge; Mrs. C.A. Johns, wife of lawyer and former Baker City mayor and in spring 1906 running as Republican candidate for governor of Oregon; and William F. Butcher, lawyer who delivered the monument dedication address.

Meeker was also extremely pleased with a parallel campaign conducted by Baker City school children. He wanted to educate children about the Oregon Trail and to give them a stake in the monument project. With Superintendent Churchill's enthusiastic support, Meeker "attended the schools of Baker City and obtained the signatures of about 800 school children who contributed to create a fund to place a bronze tablet on the monument with the result of obtaining about \$60.00 in the aggregate, in 5 & 10 cts contributions." Two of the child signatures were those of John Wisdom's school-age children, Maybelle and "June" (short for John Junior), who contributed 10 cents each. Although the money was raised and held by the school, it would be over a year and a half before wording on the tablet and its production were settled, and the tablet was applied to the monument.

During his 1906 week in Baker City, the elderly but still energetic Meeker put in long hours. On April 16, he wrote to his daughter, Caddie, in Washington, "This has been another red letter day; have been on the streets (soliciting) funds for a monument here with the result of over \$100 subscriptions.... It's 9 o'clock and I must go mail this letter, do a little telephoning, and go to bed."



Crowd gathered in 1906 for dedication of the Oregon Trail Monument on the grounds of the Old Central School on 4th St.

The afternoon of April 19 was set as the time for the dedication ceremony of the Old Oregon Trail monument on the grounds of Central School, present middle school site. But Meeker, accompanied by Churchill, spent the morning setting a

small marker on the Oregon Trail where it intersected today's Highway 86 a little west of the turnoff to the National Oregon Trail Interpretive Center on Flagstaff Hill. "During the forenoon I drove out about six miles easterly on the road to lower Powder River to an intersection on the summit of a high ridge where the trail (coming from Virtue Flat) is still now crossing the road nearly at right angle. I found a deep worn section of the Trail at the intersection and planted an inscribed granite marker 30 inches long and 9 inches square and hauled two loads of boulders to support and protect it."



Ezra Meeker on Main St. with his oxen team and covered wagon in 1906. As a young man Meeker traveled to Oregon in 1852 in a wagon like this one.

Meeker was back in town in time for dedication of the Baker City monument. "The shaft was ready in place by 12:30 and draped with American flags and at 2:30 the ceremonies began in presence of the school (children) numbering nearly 1400 and great numbers of citizens. I should say 2000 persons were in attendance. The superintendent of schools (J.A. Churchill) presiding and W.F. Butcher (Baker City lawyer) delivering the dedication address. At a given point of this address the shaft was unveiled. After the conclusion of Butcher's address, I read my own address from prepared manuscript." Meeker told his daughter that the ceremony was "impressive and excited great enthusiasm." But he wasn't happy with press coverage. The *Morning Democrat* "did not give any of its contents, but the audience seemed to appreciate my effort highly."

In a letter to George H. Himes (1844-1940), a founder of the Oregon Historical Society and its first curator, Meeker described the monument as a "ten foot granite shaft inscribed with nearly 200 letters," and expressed his pleasure with the ceremony. "It was certainly a red letter day for this expedition."

Meeker tarried in Baker City two more days, then he was on the trail again. "I can ride all the time in the wagon and yesterday took a long nap. I have my bedding unrolled and can lie down or sit reclining or sit straight up as may suit my inclination and when sitting up I can drive the oxen and often do so and give the man William (Mardon) a respite from the work. William is a good cook and does the cooking and camp work."

Writing in his journal from his camp at Pleasant Valley, Meeker described his first day back on the trail after his week in Baker City. "We left Baker City yesterday (April 21) at 8:00, nooned an hour & a quarter and camped at 3:30, 12 miles out at Pleasant Valley." That evening Meeker had visitors. "Seven men have just come into camp and contributed for erecting a stone marker at Straw Ranch, the property of John Troy, where the stone is to be planted and who flatly refuses to donate a cent." Straw Ranch was located where the Oregon Trail left Alder Creek and headed over the hill to Virtue Flat.

On April 22 Meeker "stopped at 10 o'clock 4 miles from (Pleasant Valley) camp to set a granite stone to mark an intersection." Then at noon "five young men came and helped to build a mound of stone around the marker, which stands in a short cut of the old Trail, at Straw ranch, near the bank of a small spring creek."

After setting the Straw ranch marker, Meeker continued to Durkee, where he "arrived at 4 p.m. and found a disposition to contribute for a monument....This is 13 miles from Pleasant Valley." From his camp in Durkee, Meeker wrote to his wife. "This is a small town hardly as big as Bucoda (Washington), 24 miles east of Baker City. But the people want a stone monument and started at once to pay in money for it and declare I must help to dedicate it and so I will return here (from Huntington) by railroad next Thursday and dedicate by the light of a bonfire....Our next two days drive will take us to Huntington, which is near the Oregon line and near Snake River and I think near where we crossed Snake River the last time in 1852."

While in Durkee, Meeker wrote to Albert Hindman to tell him he was taking the train to Baker City to pick up monuments for both Durkee and Huntington, after which he would go to Huntington and then return in time for the dedication of the Durkee monument. He included detailed instructions for placement and setting of the monument. "I showed Mr. M. Namara where I thought the monument ought to stand and where an excavation 3 1/2 x 3 1/2 feet made to gravel and the space filled in by small stone well tamped down; I will send cement with the stone to fill in. There ought to be a few bushels of sand provided to mix with the cement, 7 parts of sand to one of cement."

But Meeker did not return to Durkee for the dedication. In order to obtain monuments for Durkee and Huntington, on April 23 Meeker took the train back to Baker City arriving at 8 p.m. to procure the two monuments. He spent that night in Baker City, the first night of his trip not spent in camp with William and the oxen. The next day Meeker left Baker City at 10:45 a.m. via train for Weiser, where he hoped to obtain support for a monument. "At 12:00 passed the team 7 miles below Durkee. The rail and the wagon road run in Burnt River canyon most the time in close proximity with very heavy grade for the R.R."

About 2 p.m. Meeker arrived at Weiser, where he discovered, "there was no supply of stone for monuments in Wiser. Returned at 3:45 to Huntington and put up at Gate City Hotel. Soon found temper of the people favored erecting a monument and telephoned to Baker City works to inscribe and ship the stone I had selected."

William and the ox team continued on the trail to Huntington and camped fifteen miles southeast of Durkee. The team arrived in Huntington at 4 p.m. on April 24. Meeker gave up the comfort of the hotel to join Mardon in camp. "We pitched camp in a violent wind storm accompanied with considerable rain and cooked supper amid smoke, flapping tent and general discomfort. But now at 8:45 p.m. it is calm and everything is cheerful and contentment."

Meeker's travels to Baker City, Weiser, and Huntington kept him from attending the dedication of the Durkee monument, which didn't sit well with some Durkee residents. He learned that "my good name had been bandied about for obtaining money under false pretenses and appropriating it to my own use." So he arranged for Rev. Hixson to fill in for him with the result that "my character rose in the estimation of the good people and nothing but praise on every lip."

On April 25, while the monument was being erected near the old stage station in Huntington, Mayor R.W. Frame, "drove me out up Burnt River 6 miles to Jett's place, where I planted a 200 lb. inscribed granite stone below Jett's house (just west of Lime). At this point the trail leaves the gorge and takes to the hills but traces of it near the intersection is so near obliterated that but for Mr. J.S. Jett I would not have been able to identify it. The popular belief was it left the gorge near the house where a toll road had been built later. Mr. Jett had been here 40 years and probably is the only person that knew the exact location."

The next day Meeker attended the 2:30 p.m. dedication of Huntington's 4 ½ feet high, 10 inch square, 900 pound monument. School children, 73 of whom had helped fund the stone with their dimes and nickels, participated in the ceremony. With Mayor Frame presiding, the children sang "Columbia Gem of the Ocean" and Rev. R.B. Wright delivered the address. "Four girls unveiled the monument at a given point of Mr. Wright's address and very gracefully done," wrote Meeker approvingly in his journal.

Meeker was soon on his way to dedicate a monument in Vale and to points east all the way to New York City and Washington, D.C., where in early 1907 Meeker lobbied President Theodore Roosevelt and several members of Congress in support of a cross-country Oregon Trail memorial highway and for funds for another 700 trail markers.

Four years later, in 1910, Meeker at age 80 set out again on the Oregon Trail, financing this second west-to-east trek by selling a couple of books he had written plus postcards with images of his 1906-07 expedition. Having run out of books to sell, Meeker rolled into Baker City on May 3 with his covered wagon and oxen, minus William Mardon, his driver, who remained at Hot Lake Hospital after an emergency operation.

It took two weeks for a new supply of books to arrive. "Have remained here at this hotel, the Packwood, all this while. The printer or binder or between them had failed to fill my orders and so found myself completely out of books and did not receive any until the 12th after which proceeded to sell with fairly good results." But Meeker made good use of his time working on a new book.

As was the case in 1906, Meeker was very pleased with the warm reception he received again in Baker City. He wrote that he "lectured in the (newly built Carnegie) library hall to a full house and appreciative audience." After Meeker attended a Sunday service at the Presbyterian Church, "The minister at the close of his sermon announced my presence and requested the congregation to come forward to greet me...which they did and nearly the whole congregation came, some 300, to shake hands."

(Author's note: I am indebted to Meeker historian Dennis Larsen of Olympia, Washington, for his assistance and to the Washington State Historical Society for materials in its Meeker Collection in Tacoma, Washington, from which I have quoted copiously.)

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Revised June 2013.