

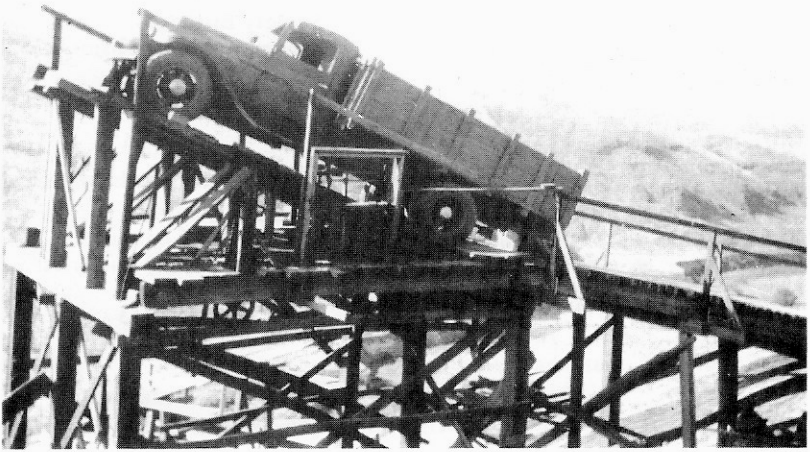
Bunchgrass Historian

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- **The Canyon Grain Chute**
- **S.C. Roberts Enters Politics**

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THE AUTHORS

Glen Lindeman is a researcher and writer from Pullman. He has been employed in historic preservation work since the early 1970s.

S.C. Roberts, introduced in earlier issues, continues his reminiscences here.

COVER

Truck ramp, Canyon grain chute, about 1941.

The Bunchgrass Historian is published four times a year by the Whitman County Historical Society. Its purpose is to further interest in the rich past of Whitman County.

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Canyon Grain Bin and Chutes

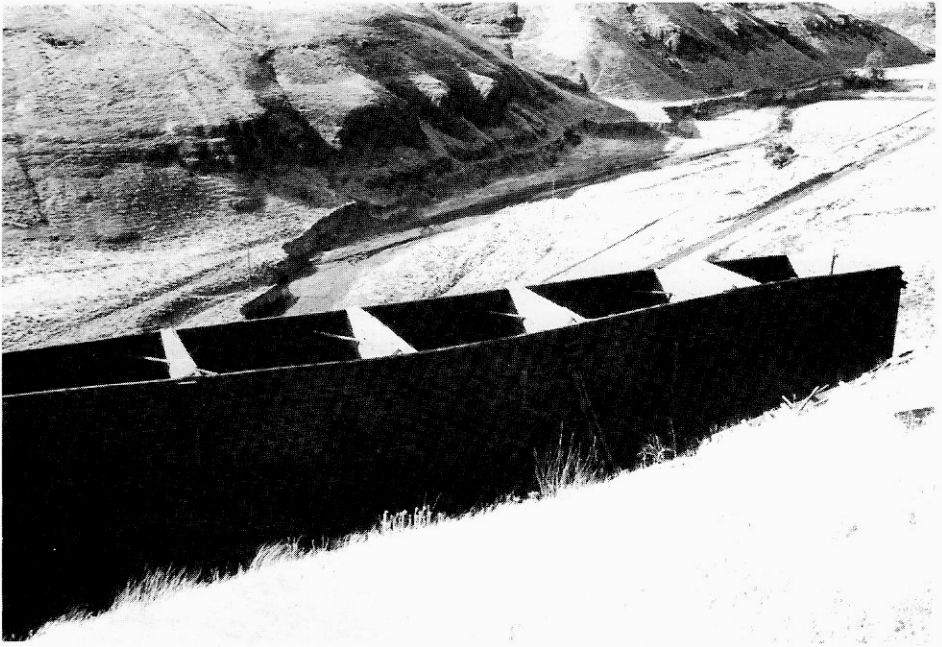
by
Glen Lindeman

The following article is the second in a series taken from nominations to the National Register of Historic Places, all dealing with agriculture-related properties in Whitman County. Readers are advised that many of the structures discussed in these articles are located on private property. Those wishing to view these structures should treat them accordingly.

— editor

Located in the semi-arid wheat country of southwest Whitman County, the Canyon facility appears to be the best preserved historic grain conveyance device in the county and, perhaps, in eastern Washington. It was built in about 1920 on the rim of the deep, sagebrush-covered canyon of Alkali Flat Creek, a tributary of the Snake River. The facility provided the means to distribute grain from the high canyon rim to a flathouse and railroad siding on the valley floor. Though now abandoned and deteriorated, its relatively good state of preservation is exceptional for these rare structures.

Standing 500 feet up the east canyon wall, it overlooked the Oregon Railway and Navigation Company (later Union Pacific) tracks and a small settlement known as Canyon. The installation included an elevated wagon or truck ramp, from which wheat was dumped and shoveled into a moveable pipeline leading down to the cribs of the main structure. There the



Grain bins, canyon grain chute

grain remained in bulk storage, until sent through chutes down the hillside to the flathouse or boxcars. Today, the facility retains its three basic elements: the truck ramp, the impressive, well-built cribbed structure, and a system of grain chutes (remaining examples of which are extremely rare in the Columbia Plateau).

The truck ramp stands farthest up the hill, about 75 feet above the grain bin. It is a rebuilt wooden structure dating from the late 1930s or 1940, and has experienced more deterioration and alteration than the other remaining features. About half of the original ramp (its upper part) has been razed. The remaining portion (the lower section of the ramp) measures approximately 12 x 30 feet, and is supported by vertical, 12 x 12 inch timbers standing on concrete piers. Considerable debris (machinery, metal fragments, boards, etc.) remains on the ground between the bins and the truck ramp. Much of this equipment appears to have been part of the pipeline system that conveyed grain from the truck ramp to the bins. The ramp was used as follows: a loaded truck was driven up the steeply inclined platform and parked; gravity then allowed grain to flow out of a small door in the truck's tailgate and into a small opening in the ramp floor; and from there a moveable grain pipe distributed the wheat to bins in the main structure.

The old roads leading to the truck ramp likewise are abandoned. These one-lane roads, now rutted and overgrown with sagebrush, come from

two directions off the high plateau. In recent years, the upper segments were totally obliterated by the plowing of wheat fields, about 1/5th of a mile uphill from the truck ramp.

The crib structure is approximately 90 feet long, 16 feet wide, 25 to 30 feet high, and has five interior grain compartments. It stands on a stone and mortar foundation in front, and on excavated bedrock at the back. The walls, consisting of stacked 1 x 6 inch plank cribbing, are reinforced on the inside by long metal rods. Now weathered, the structure formerly was painted red. The roof was removed, apparently sometime after the early 1940s; otherwise the structure remains largely intact, though exposed to the elements. It is the most prominent and best preserved feature at the site.

Five metal-lined wooden chutes lead from outlets at the base of the cribbed structure and into a larger, single chute extending on down the hillside. Most of this chute system remains unaltered. The five smaller chutes, in particular, remain nearly intact. They consist of boxed 2 x 8 inch or 2 x 10 inch boards and are open at the top. Each exits from a separate compartment in the main structure.

The large main chute, also uncovered on top, was built with ca. 2 x 12 inch planks, with strips of sheet metal covering the 8 or 10 inch wide exposed surface of the bottom boards. Metal lining, of course, facilitated the flow of grain, and protected the boards and wheat from damage due to excessive friction. The upper portion of the main chute remains intact, but, lower down the hillside, it has been knocked off its concrete or wooden piers; remnants are widely scattered. Gone is a segment of trestle and chute that extended (at boxcar height) to the OR&N tracks. The tracks and flathouse that stood on the valley floor at the base of the main chute also have been removed; only the railroad grading and portions of the flathouse foundation remain.

The little community of Canyon, which was widely scattered over the 1/5th-mile-wide valley floor, included a store and post office, school, and a few other structures, as well as the railroad siding and the Interior warehouse Company flathouse. All are gone now except some foundations, such as the substantial concrete footings of the razed schoolhouse west of Alkali Flat Creek, and concrete foundation piers and a few stones at the flathouse site at the base of the hill below the main chute.

The Canyon grain bin and chutes may be the most complete and best preserved facility to be classified under the Associated Property Type "Grain Conveyance Systems," in the Multiple Property Listing "Grain Growing in Eastern Washington." It was somewhat unusual for incorporating bulk storage bins in the design, but otherwise its technology and method of operation were typical for historic grain chutes and pipelines. Even

though it now is abandoned and deteriorated, its relative good state of preservation is exceptional for these structures, which are among the rarest of all historic agricultural properties in the Columbia Plateau.

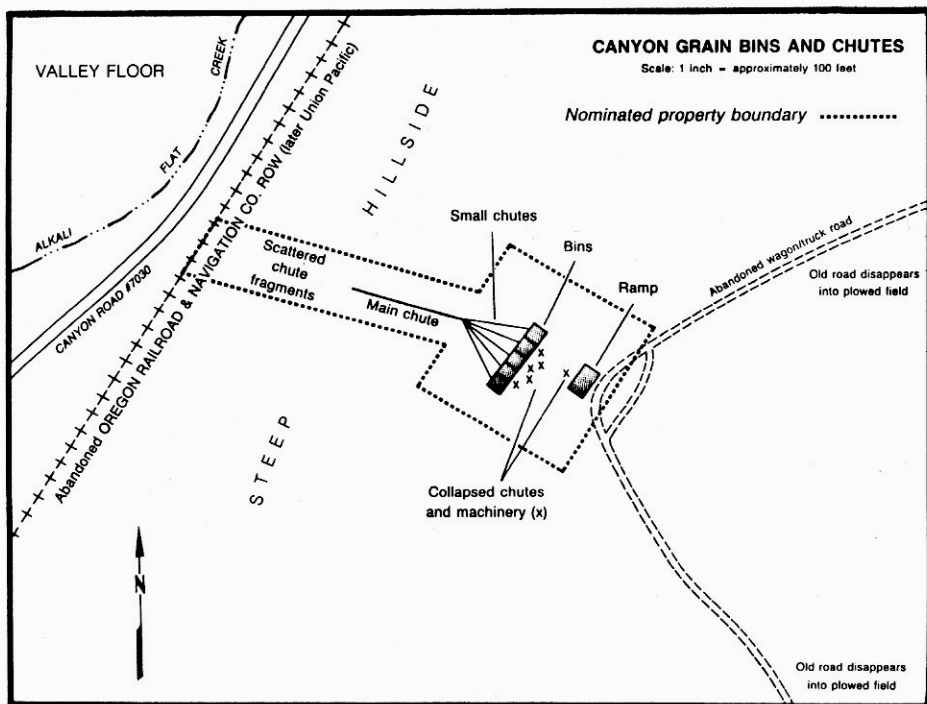
In steep canyons of the Snake and Columbia watersheds, it was difficult and time consuming for wagons to negotiate the steep, tortuous roads leading from the high plateau down to steamboat and railroad facilities on the valley floors. Consequently, farmers and grain merchants built long, linear chutes, pipelines, rail trams, or bucket trams to move grain down the canyon walls. A dozen or more were erected in eastern Washington in the late 1800s and early 1900s, and some remained in use up to the eve of the Second World War.

These unique conveyance devices played an especially prominent role in the history of the Snake River corridor in Whitman and Garfield counties. The Canyon facility was a part of this development, though it was among the last to be constructed in about 1920. Standing on the east side of Alkali Flat Creek canyon, a tributary of the Snake, it was in operation as late as the early 1940s, also making it one of the last to be utilized.

William E. Chapman, the builder of the Canyon bin and chutes, arrived in the Alkali Flat Creek country in about 1915. At the time, this dry, sagebrush-covered section of Whitman County remained very much in the "homestead stage" of development. Only lately settled, its residents yet experienced the same hardships and privations akin to pioneering in the previous century. Farmers, sheepmen, cattlemen, and railroad workers made up the local rural society. Chapman, like most of his neighbors, was a wheat grower.

On the Columbia Plateau, grain traditionally was hauled in burlap bags holding two bushels weighing 130+ pounds. The agricultural equipment and transportation facilities of the era were likewise designed to handle sacked wheat. In the 1910s, however, a number of Columbia Plateau farmers and grain merchants attempted to switch from bagging grain to handling it in bulk. New horsedrawn combines and hopper-bottom wagons had finally provided the means to haul in bulk, thus dispensing with the expensive, labor-intensive process of sacking grain. Besides, burlap sacks had become scarce in the World War I period.

By about 1920, Chapman had decided to switch to bulk handling, and he built the grain and chutes on the rim of Alkali Flat canyon. Constructing the innovative, well-built facility must have been expensive and time-consuming for an individual farmer like Chapman. He constructed hopper-bottom wagons to haul bulk grain directly from the threshers in the fields to the facility. The wagons were driven up an elevated ramp, and wheat was dumped into a pipeline system leading into the bins. Grain remained in storage, until sent down chutes as needed to the OR&N siding.



The new facility, of course, also eliminated the long wagon haul up and down the steep, 500-foot-high canyon wall.

The scheme appears to have had problems and apparently did not operate too successfully. At any rate, after a period of time, burlap became more plentiful, and Chapman, like many other growers, resumed sacking wheat again. His Canyon bins and chutes stood unused. For a variety of reasons (too extensive to explain here), bulk handling of grain would not be universally adopted in the Columbia Plateau until the late 1930s.

The property passed to other owners during the depression years of the late 1920s and 1930s, until acquired by Earl M. Pierson in about 1938. At this time, grain elevators, trucks, augers, and other gas-and electric-powered machinery were being adopted, finally allowing farmers to universally switch to bulk handling. With the encouragement (and possibly financial backing) of a banking firm (Vermont Mortgage and Loan Co.), Pierson refurbished the abandoned Canyon facility by rebuilding the truck ramp and making other modifications.

In about 1939 or 1940, Pierson and his crew put the facility into operation, but not without some problems. In 1941, for instance, a heavily laden truck slid back on its hind wheels when going up the steeply-inclined

truck ramp spilling its load of grain. The driver, Don Henley, Jr. (a future county commissioner) and the operator of another truck, Cecil "Tike" Curtis, had to shovel up the dumped grain by hand. No damage resulted from this minor incident.

More serious difficulties were encountered in the operation of the chutes, which were open on top. During its rapid descent, a portion of the grain tumbled out, scattering across the hillside. Also, wheat in the main chute could hit the waiting railroad box-car below with sufficient force to actually cause damage. The grain itself, after the quick fall, might be seared, battered, and gritty. On the other hand, the least bit of dampness hindered the flow of grain and the chutes needed to be dry before put in use. These undoubtedly were some of the same difficulties that Chapman had encountered twenty years earlier. Pierson appears to have overcome most of these problems, however, by adding jogs every few yards to slow the flow of grain.

Pierson filled the bins with about 20,000 or 25,000 bushels during the 1941 harvest. All of the grain later went down the chutes to the railroad siding. After only a couple of years, however, Pierson stopped using the facility. By then, grain was universally being hauled in trucks on modern roadways, eliminating the need for the outdated grain conveyance systems. Some salvaging was attempted, mainly resulting in removal of the main structure's roof and about half of the truck ramp, but otherwise the facility was largely left unaltered when abandoned.

Thus, the Canyon facility appears not to have been too successful. Today, however, this decayed but otherwise largely intact facility may well be the best preserved historic grain conveyance device in eastern Washington. The structure generally has escaped board and metal salvagers as well as range fires, which are rare but occasionally occur in this locality. Altogether, the facility's relative good state of preservation is quite exceptional for these rare structures.



More Reminiscences of a Pedagogue

S.C. Roberts Enters Politics

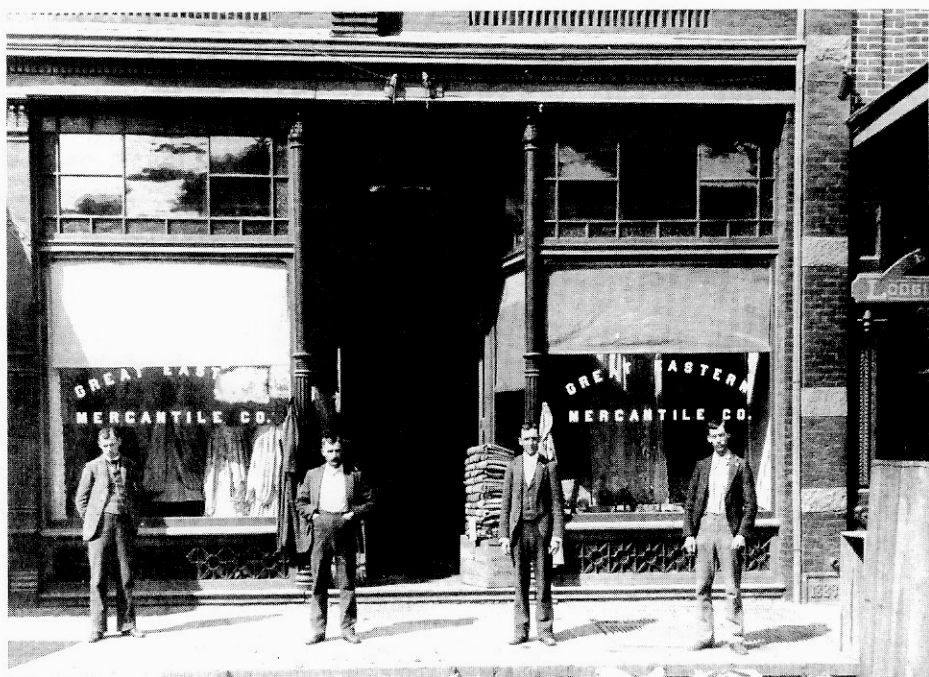
1935

by

S.C. Roberts

This chapter brings the record up to the spring of 1896, when I closed my three years' service as superintendent of Colfax public schools.

As I said, two of those years were for but six months each, at the modest salary of eight hundred dollars, the third year eight months at a thousand dollars, all with the provision that I might employ myself as best I might during the long vacation. So I occupied the sixteen vacation months on building contracts, which, fortunately, netted a sum well in excess of my salary in service of the school. During the odds and ends of time, I built and furnished for myself a modest but comfortable home. Altogether, those three years netted quite substantial savings, for living expenses were low, building materials were at about a third of the present levels, and good stove length mill wood was delivered at three dollars a cord. Two very good, well located residence lots on an unimproved street cost me but fifty dollars, with twenty five dollars for excavating and grading. My five-room house finished for about a thousand dollars, and, after occupying it seven years, I sold it for twenty two hundred. I am speaking of these details as illustrative of a general method of meeting the problems of living, at a time of greatest financial stringency. I planted a dozen three-year-old



Colfax, about 1900

fruit trees, some berry bushes, ornamental shrubbery and ample kitchen garden.

George Rudy, the local nurseryman, who originated the well known Palouse apple, advised planting the larger trees instead of the yearlings usually selected. He included a five year-old damson plum tree with his guarantee that it would bear half a bushel of fruit the first year. We dug and planted all the trees on a misty day in March, with the result that the plum yielded more than a hundred pounds, and the cherries, three trees supplied all we needed both for the table and for canning. Exhibiting my potatoes at the county fair, they were awarded first prize both for quality and yield, which, based in measurement of both the crop and the ground, at the rate of nearly six hundred bushels to the acre. After the first year we had more berries, apricots, apples and pears than we could use. My third year garden included three hills of water melon and five of cantaloupe. The seed were germinated in pint strawberry boxes under glass and were blooming when, in early May, they were set out. For such a venture I was rallied much by my good neighbors, for my presumption, more especially because the plants, with any possible melons, were in full view of a cow path which wound along the unimproved street to a pasture not far away; and along that path, about a dozen boys, with their cows, passed each morning and evening. The vines made a luxurious growth and were set with a fine crop of melons, and some were nearly ripe, when, one morning

as I was busied with some physical apparatus in the basement where I could see and not be seen, through a small window. I heard voices of four boys who had stopped by the fence looking over my melons. They were no more than fifty feet away as I listened to the following dialogue: "Just look at the professor's melons. Mighty sheeky to plant melons so close to our cow-path." "See, they're commencing to get ripe." "Let's investigate 'em." "All right. When! "Moons too bright now, what say about a week from tonight, at 'leven o' clock." "All right, we'll all be here." And they leisurely trudged away. Slipping out, I intercepted the boys at the corner of the lot and called out, "Come here a minute, boys, let me show you something." Humorously significant glances were exchanged, but they came along and I led them to the melon patch, saying, "There isn't another town in the United States where melons could ripen right in plain sight of a boy's cow-path. The neighbors all have said I'd not get a melon, and just look at them, and you're not going to pass 'em up. Some of them, I think, will be ripe about next Friday. So, if you'll stop when you come along at five o' clock that evening I'll pick some for you. Bring all the cow-boys with you." Under thin disguised embarrassment one said, "That'll be fine. We'll all be here. "Promptly at the appointed time, eight boys appeared and I gave them four cantaloupes and the only ripe water melon I could find, invited them into the basement to eat them. So far as I know, my melons were not molested and I gathered, all told, forty three water melons and ninety odd canteloupes before the vines were killed by frost. By such means we came quite comfortably through the severest financial stringency in the history of the Northwest.

During the summer of eighteen hundred ninty five, I became Republican candidate for the office of County School Superintendent, only to go down in defeat with the entire ticket under the overwhelming wave of successful Populism, which swept, not only the county, but the entire state. The county was fortunate, however, in having elected, with one exception, honest and capable men. Mr. James Phillips, my opponent, proven and exceptionally devoted official who spared no pain to serve well the schools of the county. A teacher well known since the middle eighties, he resumed teaching again after the expiration of his term as superintendent. Now, an octogenarian, he is retired and lives in Spokane. I can easily imagine him in my audience tonight.

Sole exception among the list of capable populist county officers, was William McDonald, raised to be judge of the Superior Court. Loudest of all among his fellows during the campaign, in denunciation of graft and favoritism, in office he became notorious in his efforts to build up a personal political following, by methods most reprehensible. His memory is a by-word and a hissing. Many of his official acts were so flagrant as justly to

merit impeachment, but no such action was taken. I will cite one instance of his pettiness. Having purchased a forty acre tract of depleted grazing land just outside the corporate limits of Colfax, he conceived a novel method of securing alfalfa seed to supplant the almost extinct bunch grass. On the pretence of a neighborly service to those he approached, he offered to economize of both postage and transportation by having all their seeds included in a single shipment to himself to be delivered personally. On arrival of the seeds and before their distribution he appropriated the alfalfa seed, of which he had specially requested a maximum package with each individual assortment, securing enough free seed to renew his pasture.

Political lines during the campaign had been so tightly drawn that even my school board became populist by appointment. The Colfax superintendent became a party perquisite, and I secured a rural school on Tennessee Flat, now a part of Steptoe District. There, my salary, including tuitions to my popular evening singing school, was nearly equal to what I had received at Colfax. Continuing residence in Colfax, I bought a fine saddle horse for fifteen dollars and rode the nine miles to school and back daily. There I made many fast friends who have remained loyal to this day.

In 1897-98, I was again offered and accepted the nomination for county superintendent. The day after the nominating convention, J. C. Muerman, superintendent of the Moscow Schools, suggested that I become candidate for the principalship of Russell school there, and on the following day there came a letter from Mr. Coates, clerk of the board, offering me the position. In my reply I stated that I should be glad to accept with the provision that, should I prove to be successful in the coming election, I would be released. In a few days another letter from Mr. Coates read, "The Moscow School Board instructs me to say, in reply to your conditional acceptance of the principalship of Russell School, that, in their opinion, the likelihood of electing a Republican to the superintendency of Whitman County is so remote as not likely to interfere with the orderly conduct of Russell School, and we therefore accept your provision to be released should such a chance obtain." So I began the year at Moscow, teaching eighth grade, with supervision of the seven other grades. In all my fifty years of teaching, I never enjoyed more pleasant relations with school and community than I had at Moscow. Mr. Muerman had confided to me that he was contemplating the possibility of a change of location, and I was lead to think I might become his successor. As a matter of fact, it was not long until he accepted appointment as superintendent of the Island of Cebu, Phillippine Islands, where, for seven years, he rendered outstanding service in establishing the public school system in that island, as well as contributing much as advisor to the entire national school organization of the Philippines.



Colfax, about 1900

But the unexpected happened. I was successful in the Whitman County elections, and have to confess to disappointment in putting an end to the pleasant relations and prospects at Moscow. Such feelings tempered and elation over a success at the polls. And so it was, after three months of pleasant work in Moscow, I took over the duties of Superintendent of Whitman County, where, some ten years before, I had served as deputy. The legislature had just enacted a law changing from January to August the date of beginning the superintendent's term in office, and, notwithstanding a constitutional impediment to extending the term of an officer after his election, the Attorney General ruled that the seven months should be added, and so, my term was to be two years and seven months. The annual salary was twelve hundred dollars with allowance for mileage in school visitation.

Visiting schools I found to be very much larger undertaking than it was eight years before. The number of districts has increased to a hundred and fifty eight. No roads were yet macademized; very few were even graded. During the rainy season, most roads were impassable. So visiting must be done in spring and autumn. I managed, however, to visit each school once a year, the larger ones twice. The towns, a score of them, were all reached by railroad, and so were accessible in winter. Altogether I drove my horse more than twenty thousand miles in school visitation.

On the first Monday in January, when I assumed the duties of the office, there came a letter from Mrs. Collins, Clerk of District number one hundred and thirteen, southeastern-most in the county, a district roundly eleven miles long and eight miles wide. The letter read, in part, "It has been seven years since the county Superintendent has visited our school.

The board is in great need of information and advise. Let me know if you will come, and when, and I will call a meeting of the school board to meet with you." Arriving at the school soon after nine o'clock, after a drive of some twenty miles, I found the room crowded with pupils. The rear seats were filled with well grown young men and women, among them a brother and sister in one seat, who, I learned, were son and daughter of the School Clerk. During the morning intermission, I discovered the two had completed the eighth grade the year before and were reviewing because no high school work was offered. They said some from the district were attending Gonzaga, in Spokane, but that was too far away and too expensive. In my talk to the school I took occasion to speak of the secondary school work offered by the elementary Science Department of the State College at Pullman, and its excellent arrangements for taking care of students preparing for college.

One result of that visit was that Oscar Collins and his sister soon entered the Pullman institution where they graduated in due time with much credit, another sister followed a little later.

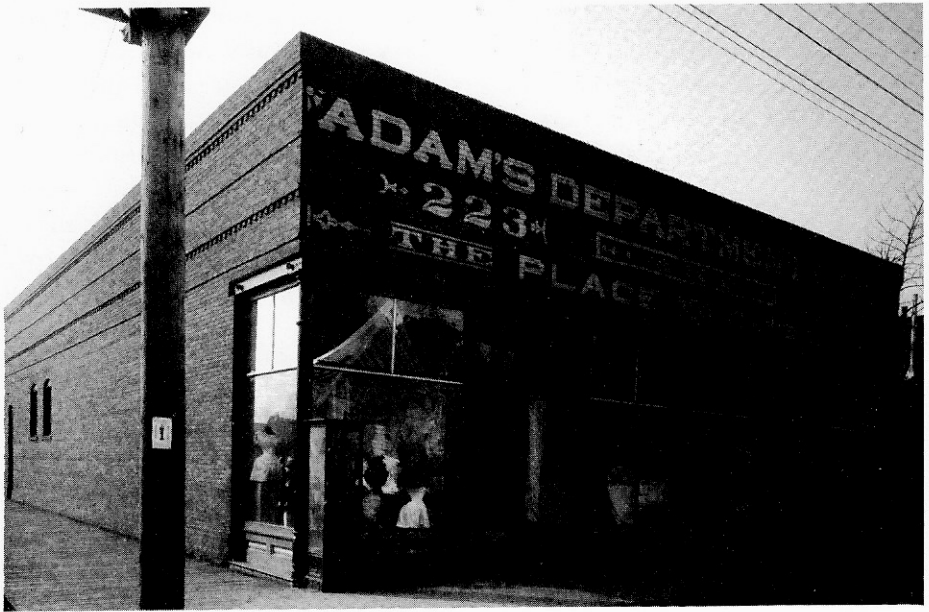
The next week, during a visit to Thornton School, I found James Davis, his sister, now Mrs. Oscar Collins, and his two brothers, the result that they all came to Pullman.

And so it happened that many young people were introduced to opportunities to seek higher education under the liberal provisions for all young people who were without the advantages of accessible high schools. It is interesting to note that the total enrollment at the College that year was three hundred, with but twelve graduating from collegiate courses. Elementary students outnumbered the collegiates by nearly five to one.

Scarcely a visit made during my entire term, that did not discover one or more young people eager to discuss the possibility of going to college and later becoming recruits. The great majority of teachers themselves were all too meagerly prepared, and few of them continued long in service. On the basis of statistics for nineteen hundred, the average term of service for women was two and a half years, and for men, less than three years. Each year the turnover was nearly fifty percent.

Mr. F.T. Barnard, now and for twenty seven years past, Registrar of the college, was a prominent member of the football team in nineteen hundred, and tells this story; "We were on our way to play against the Normal School at Lewiston, Idaho, when the new coach, Bill Allen, from Michigan, took me to task for talking too much, being only a freshman. Appealing to the older men of the team, he said, 'Why do you fellows let freshman do all the talking?'" A big fellow closed the incident by saying, 'It's none of our business, we're all preps.'"

A good opportunity to acquaint the teachers of the county with the advantages offered by the college, presented itself while I was beginning pre-



Colfax, about 1900

paration for my first teachers' Institution. In course of a conversation with President Bryan, he suggested that the institution be held at the college, in which case he would offer the services of the entire faculty as needed, and the expense to the county. In such a case it occurred to me that a two weeks term should be substituted for the customary minimum of one week. As the law made attendance compulsory for the full term offered, I invited and expression from the teachers by circular letter. The reply was enthusiastic and unanimous for a two week session, not a single teacher offering any objection. So the institution was duly advertised to be held in Pullman, August twenty second to September second.

While attending the National Education Association at Los Angeles a short time before, I had met personally Bob Burdette, the Hawkeye man, Dr. E.E. White, author of *School Management*, Mr. Quick, author of *Educational Reformers*, A.E. Winship, editor of the *England School Journal*, Superintendent Greenwood of Kansas City, and C.H. Keys, of Massachusetts Institution of Technology, in an effort to secure the services of a man of eminence for special lectures. But they all had conflicting engagements, so, on the suggestion of Mr. Keys, I secured Preston W. Search, a well known inspirational lecturer on art, literature and travel, who attended the institute throughout the session and contributed much to the entertainment and instruction of the teachers.

I close this chapter with a quotation from the *Western Journal of Education* published in San Francisco, October, eighteen ninety nine, and another prep story.

“Supt. S.C. Roberts of Whitman County, Washington, held one of the most notable educational gatherings of the year. It was a two week’s institute with a corps of fifteen instructors, ten evening lectures and an enrollment of three hundred teachers. The meetings were held in the auditorium of the State Agricultural College and School of Science at Pullman. The faculty of the College assisted. He had from a distance, State Superintendent Brown, and Superintendent Saylor of Spokane; President Wilson, of Ellensburg, Harr Wagner of San Francisco; J.C. Muerman of Moscow, Idaho; and Preston W. Search of Boston. One of the most notable features of the meeting was the large attendance at the evening lectures. Superintendent Roberts arranged an excellent program, section work and general sessions. Whitman County has an able corps of teachers. The college at Pullman, with its large and progressive faculty headed by President Bryan, and with such men as ex-State Supt. Bean among his teachers, Supt. Roberts is bound to place Whitman County in front rank. One of the most notable addresses was a report of the N.E.A. at Los Angeles, by Supt. Roberts. He told the story of the meeting in a most excellent manner.”

Your speaker still enjoys the echo of a thrill in reciting the notice I have just read, by the editor, Harr Wagner of the Journal. My excuse for the inclusion is the egotist’s proverb, “He that tooteth not his own horn, verily his horn shall not be tooted—very much.”

A raw recruit to the “Prep” Department enrolled a few days late, and the Rolling Squad had reached his door in Ferry Hall. Now to enroll a student was to turn his bed upside down over him. The leader of the squad, with a kick at the door, the transom being open, but the door locked, called out, “Unlock this door, we’re coming in.” “All right, gentlemen, come right in,” came the reply. After a vain attempt to force the door, the aggressive spokesman for the squad was picked up by his fellows and thrust through the transom into the room. He was soon done to a finish and returned to the hallway outside as neatly as he had come in. “If the rest of you will come in now one at a time you’re perfectly welcome,” came the cheerful voice from the room and it was said that recruit never was rolled.