

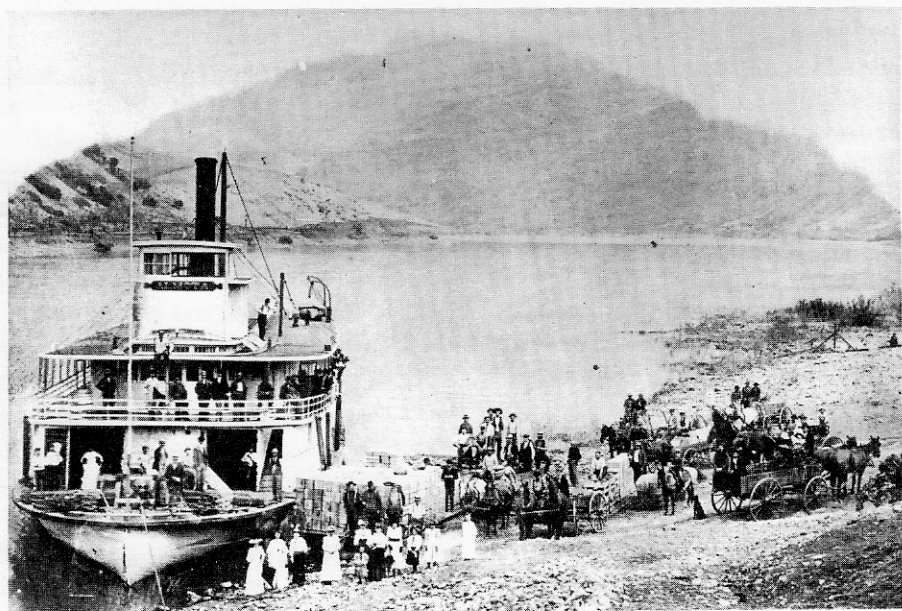
Bunchgrass Historian

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- **Hard Times & Rural Values**
- **Almota Reminiscences**

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Cynthia Holbrook was an Almota pioneer.

COVER

Along the Snake River, Whitman County.

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P.O. Box 67
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Memberships and subscriptions

Gwenlee Riedel
Membership Committee
Whitman County Historical Society
SW 220 Blaine
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Articles for Publication:

Lawrence R. Stark, Editor

The Bunchgrass Historian

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The Bunchgrass Historian

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Hard Times in Whitman County:

A Case Study Of The Agrarian Ideal In America

by Andrew Sonneland

In advocating his vision of a nation of self-sufficient agrarians, Thomas Jefferson helped define a myth which would survive long after it had any basis in fact. Jefferson maintained that the proportion of a nation's tradesmen to that of its farmers "is the proportion of its unsound to its healthy parts, and is a good enough barometer whereby to measure its degree of corruption." Because they are close to the earth, engaging in the most basic vocation, "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue."¹

The yeoman of Jefferson's vision was not tilling the soil for commercial interests, but rather supporting the needs of his frontier household. But in the early 1800s, advances in transportation brought the farm to urban markets, the subsistent agrarian became a capitalist, and the idea of the work ethic — that anyone willing to work hard will be rewarded with financial success — was embraced by the small farmer.

Over the next century, while other businesses gradually succumbed to free market forces toward concentration, the nation's treasured ideal of the family farm only grew stronger despite a hostile economic system.² By the time of the Depression of the 1920s and 1930s, the yeoman of the myth had little in common with the experiences of the nation's farmers. While economic conditions forced the small farmer to accept substantial amounts of government aid, the romanticized agrarian remained an independent capitalist. While massive stockpiles of grain called for a more efficient method of production, tradition insisted on the necessity of an unlimited number of small farms. The farmer of the Great Depression chose to deny the realities of the changing world about him, and instead looked to the past to identify himself with the yeoman of the myth.

Whitman County, in southeastern Washington, produced more wheat than any other county in the nation in the 1930s. Pullman, the county's

largest town and site of the state's agricultural college, is a conservative farm community in the heart of the rolling hills of the Palouse country. Conversations with those farming in Whitman County during the early thirties, and an examination of Pullman's weekly newspaper during the Depression reveals the extent to which the myth of the yeoman farmer had been embraced by the community. The myth, and its defense against the economic realities of the Depression, is found in abundance in the recollections of area farmers, and in the local paper's editorials, letters from subscribers, and even in its editorial cartoons.

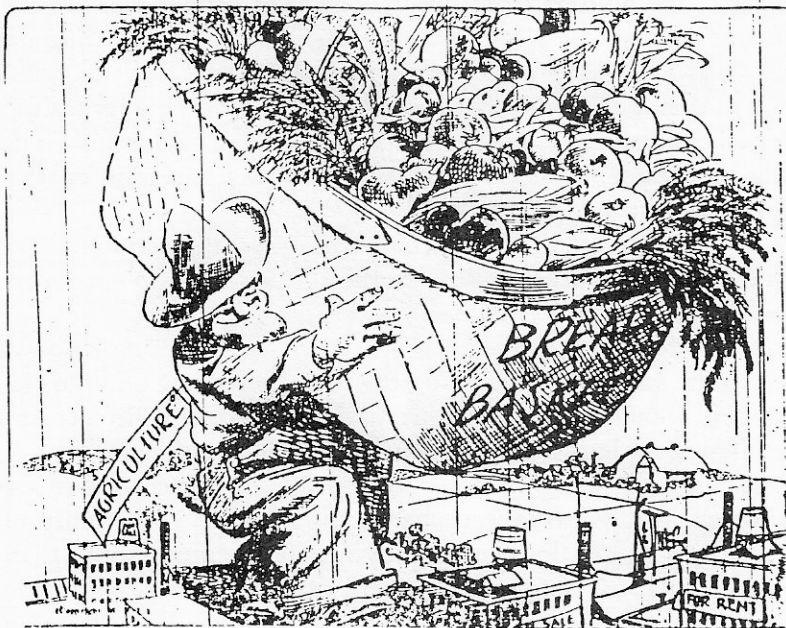
The role of the farmer as provider to the nation was a treasured one. The Whitman County Agricultural Extension Agent, in charge of administering the New Deal wheat program, wrote that "to many farmers it seemed almost sacrilegious to leave good wheat land lying idle."³ Indeed, farmers from across the nation, writing to Secretary of Agriculture Wallace, favored an alternative to the crop-reduction program by a two to one margin.⁴ As one Pullman area farmer recalls: "That's the worst job I ever did in my life back in the old allotment days, that I hated, as I just couldn't hardly do, was take a big disc out there and just ground good wheat."⁵

The farmer put in long hours in the field so that the nation might be free from want. But in the shadow of mountains of wheat, the implication was that the farmer was not, after all, as important as he had imagined. The government was actually paying him not to produce. A woman working with the Whitman County Agricultural Extension Service in the early thirties remembers: "I know the wheat prices were low, but I can't remember that sort of thing. I do remember the milk being destroyed and that sort of thing, and hogs too, and little pigs were killed. But I don't see that destroying food helps anybody." It was one thing for industry to cut-back production. But the farmer, "God's chosen people," would not accept the idea that economic forces could diminish the worthiness of his calling.

The problem, according to the farmer, was not overproduction — witness the breadlines across the nation. There can be no oversupply as long as there are those without enough to eat:

A great step forward has been taken by the disappearance of the old plaint that overproduction is the trouble. This has already been laughed out of public discussion, and men and women are now turning their thoughts to subject of what can be done to overcome the real difficulty, which is underconsumption.⁶

The farmer, the editorial suggests, has been scorned for doing his part to feed the nation. America's farmers have been efficient producers, but the "working out of a plan for a more efficient system of distribution is a duty devolving upon big business men rather than upon the farmers."⁷ Similarly, a Whitman County grower maintains: "I suppose maldistribution is the



proper word. So really as far as food's concerned there was no real surplus of food, but just distribution." Growing surpluses and falling prices told America's farmers that their ranks needed thinning, while the myth asserted that the small farmer was as important in the Depression as ever before. The farmer believed the latter.

The farmer's conviction that in his independence he could prosper in an open market became increasingly difficult to reconcile with his experience. The roots of the work ethic ran deep in the popular culture. If he should fail in his role as capitalist, the farmer felt he had only himself to blame. When finally forced by economic straits to depend on government aid, admission of defeat would seem to follow. But the romanticized yeoman in the heart of the American farmer would not concede so easily: "Oh, I think we'd have worked out of it. It wasn't the first time we had hard times. There probably would have been more of them go out of business."

The Pullman area was hardly a haven of sympathy for those not financially self-sufficient in the pre-New Deal period of the Depression. One area resident believes that "There's been an awful lot of 'em on the bread-line that shouldn't of never been. They should have went out and tried to help themselves a little bit — they didn't. They just sit and put their tail between their legs and wait for somebody to feed 'em." Whether or not one was managing to make it on his own was seen as an accurate reflection

of one's mettle: An editorial in the Pullman Herald noted that:

At least one good result of the present financial depression will be to segregate the quitters from the stickers. The farmer will use the depression as an excuse for throwing up their hands, evading paying their bills and going into bankruptcy. The latter will take another hitch in their belts, work harder and longer, cut their overhead a little deeper, convince their creditors that they will be paid in full, and then hang onto their farms or business enterprises like grim death until prosperity returns.⁸

Many of the "quitters," in fact, had renounced the economic system in which they were failures. A letter to the editor relates an encounter of the author's upon his visit to Pullman's "hobo jungle:"

I saw two fellows — 16 to 18 years old — bright young fellows they were. One said he was studying the economic question in his leisure time. He seemed to be a socialist, and well informed. In fact most of the jungle people are either socialists or communists.⁹

Transients in Pullman in the early thirties could receive Red Cross rations for up to three days in exchange for work on community projects. The chairman of the local unemployment committee noted that, while men were being fed, the primary benefit of the program could be found in "the very great reduction in the amount of panhandling, begging at the stores and homes and noticeably fewer men hanging about the streets. There are fewer professional bums and fewer malcontents."¹⁰ But those with any self-respect would not be found at the labor depot.

Though times are tough, the unemployed should try to make it on their own. As one woman wrote to the editor, "these unemployed ... can find a way out if they try."¹¹ An editorial entitled "Too Proud to Beg" reads: "It is encouraging to note that in these times of stress many thousands of the unemployed are too proud to become dependent upon charity and are devising ways and means of earning all or part of their necessities."¹² Criticism of those "dependent upon charity" ended abruptly with the Agricultural Adjustment Act.

In the fall of 1933, 2,898 Whitman County farmers, 94 percent of the county's growers, signed up for benefit payments under the Roosevelt Administration's wheat allotment program. That winter, participating farmers received their first government subsidies, totalling more than one million dollars.¹³ Though they accepted the aid, farmers would not accept its implication — that they needed government, or anyone else, to save them. One farmer, who participated in the wheat allotment program, says of Roosevelt: "They just went for him big as hell. But he's the bastard who's put us right where we are today. He's the one that started us in this damn depression right today. If he'd of let us crawl out of it instead of jumpin' out, why we'd of been a hell of a lot better off." If the myth of the inde-



pendent farmer was to survive in light of the farmer's dependence on government, some creative thinking was needed to reconcile the myth with the reality.

Henry Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture under Roosevelt, was not unaware of the importance of the work ethic to the farmer. In a pamphlet distributed to the nation's farmers, Wallace was careful to emphasize the farmer's responsibility in the wheat program: "A farm is a private business. The Government does not propose to enter into private businesses and run them. The Government does not propose to tell you how to run your farm or to come in and do your plowing and seeding for you ... the government is not offering the farmer or anyone else a hand-out."¹⁴ The appeal of the work ethic was used to win the support of those whom the work ethic had failed. The tactic worked.

Editorials in the Pullman Herald about "quitters," "professional bums," and those "too proud to beg," are conspicuous in their absence after the inauguration of the New Deal. Despite the assertion that farm subsidies are not a "hand-out," feelings of failure had to have been close to the surface in a community clutching the work ethic so tightly. Remembering Roosevelt's farm program, one long-time Whitman County grower maintains:

With the wheat allotment we were laying out some damn good land that we could be raising wheat on. We ain't getting a gift there. We

were helping other people there. That's no gift to us. A wheat allotment. We were helping other people. We were helping other people 'cause we're taking wheat out of production and they're paying us for it, but they're doing that to keep the price up for other people.

To be sure, it was not the failure of the farmer, or of the capitalist system that emerged as the agrarian's explanation for the collapse of American agriculture.

In an editorial entitled "Not a Gift," the reader is reminded that "during the War the government urged the farmers to enormously increase the production of wheat as a patriotic duty." Increased production made for a surplus of wheat when the increased demand had disappeared. In doing his part in the War effort, the farmer was stuck with economic problems that were no fault of his own. "The government is now trying to remedy this injustice by encouraging the growers to reduce production by the means of adjusted compensation."¹⁵ If he had been left alone, the independent farmer would surely have thrived in the capitalist economy. As one farmer remembers: "Of course when the price didn't come up, then they blamed the Government for the surplus and lack of distribution." Recalling the myth of the American yeoman, another local grower notes that "The old independent pioneer farmer, you see, was really independent, and they didn't like too much government either." The belief that the problems of agriculture are the result of government "interference," not with the economic system itself, has become a given in the mind of the American farmer.

While the New Deal saved the small farmer from the consequences of an open market, government involvement diverted inevitable criticism from the economic system — criticism which might have led to more than the New Deal's cosmetic reforms. The myth of the small farmer has survived long after it had any basis in actual experience. But the romanticized world of the farmer of the myth has surely been a more pleasant one than that of his real-life counterpart.

FOOTNOTES

1. Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on the State of Virginia," (1781-1785); from *The Complete Jefferson*, by Saul K. Padover (ed.); (Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, Inc. 1943).
2. See Appendix I, below
3. Annual report of County Extension Agent, Carl Izett, from 8/10/33-12/31/33.
4. "Populism in the Nineteen-Thirties: The Battle for the AAA", John Shover; *Ag. Hist.* V.39, 1965; p.18
5. All quotations of Whitman County residents are from interviews by the author of people owning farms, or in the case of one woman, working with the agricultural extension service, during the Depression. The interviews took place over four weekends in the spring of 1983 while the author attended the University of Washington, and during three visits totalling 10 days that summer. The six interviewed are: Herb Camp, Roy Davis, Ralph Gillespie, Max Hinrichs, Rae Knott and John Walli. The interviews were conducted at their homes, all within a two hundred mile radius of Pullman, Washington.
The quotation from these six are not offered as proof that farmers across the nation believed the myth in the face of economic realities that denied it. The romanticized version of the American farmer has been discussed in detail and on a larger scale by others — most notably in Richard Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform*, in Ingolf Vogeler's *The Myth of the Family Farm: Agribusiness Dominance of Agriculture*, and as oral history in Studs Terkel's *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*. The interviews for this paper, then, serve merely to corroborate what has been made clear in the above and other works, and with the editorials and cartoons, to provide a local perspective on the myth during the Depression.
6. Pullman Herald, 11/11/32
7. *ibid*; 10/23/32
8. *ibid*; 7/24/31
9. *ibid*; 8/5/32
10. *ibid*; 8/19/32
11. *ibid*; 7/22/32
12. *ibid*; 10/21/32
13. County Agent Report; November 1933 & February 1934
14. "A Balanced Harvest," United States Dept. of Agriculture; August 1933; p.8
15. Pullman Herald, 2/23/34

16. Representative Smith (Alabama), in Appendix to the Congressional Globe, 1st session, 32nd Congress, V.25, p.515; 1852
17. Ray Allen Billington, *Westward Expansion*, (Macmillan, 1963), pp. 207, 213-214, 252
18. *ibid*; p. 367
19. Fred Shannon, "The Homestead Act and the Labor Surplus," in *The American Historical Review*, V.XLI, July, 1936, p. 637
20. *ibid*; p. 683

Reminiscences

Cynthia Catherine Holbrook

Almota, Wash.

May 7, 1934

I am now in my 75th year. A member of the Auditorium has requested me to write a statement of my past life. I never attempted to write such a statement before, so please excuse my mistakes.

I was born on a small farm near the Neosho Falls in Coffey Co. Kansas, Dec. 5, 1859. That was a new country at that time. My parents and one sister came there in a covered wagon drawn by an ox team in the summer of 1859 from Indiana, and settled on the Kansas Prairie.

We lived there until the spring of 1862. Father sold out there and moved nearer to the Neosho, on a little creek called Spring Creek.

I can remember so well what the place looked like when we got there.

A new log house and Sumac bushes all around the house and some small Hickory trees. I thought it was so lovely we could find shade for a play house all times of the day. Mother and we three children (there were three of us then, one little brother) were taken about three fourths of a mile to my grandparents to stay while Uncle John and Father finished the new fireplace. They had gone to the quarry near by and hauled sandstone to make the fireplace. That stone is so soft when first taken out it can be dressed in any shape and laid like brick.

They finished the fireplace and came for us that evening.

The hearth was just one big flat rock. We had no cook stove, cooked by the fireplace. It was the best fireplace in my estimation I ever saw. It never smoked no matter how the wind blew.

Mother did all her baking in a big Dutch oven set in coals on the hearth. That was my baby hood home and I loved it.

My oldest sister and I used to do all kinds of chores, take care of the babies while Mother spun yarn and wove cloth to make our winter clothes. I must leave out my fun and all the good times we had at school as it will make my story too long. The summer of 1867, my Father built a new eight room house finished on the outside with weather boarding instead of the rustic used these days. It was all painted white and looked real

nice, but it was not warm like the log cabin. The inside of the rooms and the walls were all covered with ceiling lumber, something like the wainscoting of the present time. It was also painted but we had no fireplace the first winter and we suffered from the cold that winter trying to warm by a heater. There was a sand and gravel bank on the place near the creek so Father took that sand, gravel, and lime and made a kind of cement and took it upstairs (for the upper rooms were not ceiled) and poured it between the studding, every outside wall and the partition walls also.

When that dried it was as hard as cement pavement. The house was real warm now but Father missed the fireplace so he had one built later.

We lived in it that way for some time. As the family got larger we didn't have bedrooms enough, so they concluded to have the upper story finished so Father had all the old ceiling taken off and used it for lathing the upstairs. We had the whole finished with plaster, two coats of plaster and one of cement. It made a nice finish that could be washed with soap and water and looked like new. We lived there until 1876 and there were seven sisters of us and two brothers (besides our eldest brother who died at the age of four years and was buried in a graveyard near our home.)

We used to go there real often and plant flowers and take bouquets.

I could say a lot about the good times we used to have with the neighbor children and school mates but it will make my story too long.

My Father sold the farm of 3/4 sections for \$7,000.00 so we all got on the train and started for Washington Territory where a couple of my uncles and their families were living. We started the first of March so there was plenty of snow in the mountains. We were snow bound a couple of times so we had to wait until the snow plows opened the road. We finally got to San Francisco where we got an ocean steamer, The A Jacks. We got to Portland but it took four days and the next trip that boat sank with all on board, so we had a lot to be thankful for that we had escaped from the watery grave.

We came from Portland to Vancouver on a river steamer. There our uncles met us with teams and wagons to take us out to their timber homes. We were sixteen days on the road, that was in the spring of 1876. I lived four years in that vicinity, during which time I married Glosson H. Holbrook, who was also born in Kansas, Burben Co. Nov. 2, 1858. Although we never heard of each other until we met in Washington. He crossed the plains when he was five years old with his parents in a covered wagon train.

Will now go back and describe the Vancouver country. It was at that time surrounded on three sides by heavy fir timber and the Columbia River on the other. The most lovely timber I ever saw and to think they just cut it down and burned it - thousands and thousands of feet of good saw timber.

The trees were so tall, so thick and so straight. My Father told me that I would most likely live to see the day that the timber that was being cut down, would be worth more than the cleared land besides all the hard work to get rid of it. What timber there is left there now is valuable but all the choice timber is gone now. Mr. Holbrook bought 40 acres of that land before we were married and that winter we slashed down a small portion of it to clear a place for a house and garden. The next summer when it got dry, he burned the slashing and built us a little four roomed house and we moved in - a happier couple you never saw. Of course he didn't do all the work himself. We had a few head of cattle that we traded for work.

My Father told me, when we first moved to our new home, we would be old and gray before we got a nice home made there. Of course that was only a start, the logs had to be cut in lengths so they could be handled then it took about five men to roll them in heaps to burn. Then the stumps had to be burned (blasted first of course). My Father had cleared land in Indiana.

When a person got to thinking about the work, it was a little discouraging. Mr. Holbrook had two brothers in this country in the bunch grass prairies - Greenville and Glidden. Greenville had lost his wife about six months before this, so he wrote us to come on up here and he would give my husband work on the place and I could live there and keep house for them until we could find a place of our own. That looked so encouraging that we gave way and left all our household goods, except what we could put in two small suitcases and a trunk, and a little roll of bedding and left our new home and started for the Palouse Country.

We came The Dalles on a river steamer, where we changed and rode on a train to Wallula. There we changed to a boat again and laid over there waiting for a load. From there we came to Walla Walla and took a stage coach to Dayton. We had to taken an open stage from Dayton to Penawawa. There were snow drifts on all the hill sides. Our baby Vina was just about fourteen months old. I was afraid she would take her death of cold the stage was crowded and was up on a high seat with the driver, and Mr. Holbrook stood up behind the seat. When we got to Tucanyon the stage stopped for breakfast. I refused breakfast for I knew Mr. Holbrook had paid his last dollar for stage fare. There was a young man, a neighbor, who had come with us, came and told me he would pay the bill, so I took the baby to breakfast. The price was in the wall, 50 cents a plate and not much on the plate either. I didn't relish what I did eat knowing that the boys were without breakfast. They told me afterward that it took all they both had to pay the bill. We were just a week on our way up here. I never did learn why we were so long on the road and why we made so many changes.

We crossed the river on a ferry boat at Penawawa. Mr. Holbrook took Vina and me to the hotel and he and our neighbor unloaded our freight.

Our trunk was gone but we had a little lunch basket and there were some cheese and crackers left, so the boys put them into their pockets and started to find Mr. Holbrook's brother, Greenville Holbrook, eating their lunch as they went. They found the place about 6 P.M. and were back after Vina and me about noon. It was on March 25, 1880 P.M. when I arrived at the Little Penewawa Creek, where I have made my home most of the time for the last 54 years. The first summer and winter we were here we made home with Greenville Holbrook. We had another dear little baby born the 11 of December, so Vina had a little sister Elsie. The next spring we built a house on a piece of Government land just across the flat from Greenville's home and took a preemption on it. That was the summer of 1881. Mr. Holbrook got a chance to trade our place in Clark Co. for five head of horses, harness, a wagon, plow, harrow and a few more implements and a household outfit. It wasn't much but it was all we needed to furnish our house for it was only 16 - 20 ft. (two rooms)

We had a home again and we were very thankful. Money was very scarce that fall and no work to be had. Winter came and no wood.

My brother, younger than I from Clark Co., came to visit us and was going to stay all winter. He made a proposition that we take the team and wagon and load in our beds and clothing and what provisions we could and all go up into the timber back of Viola. They would take their axes, saw and wedges and cut posts to fence the place. I said I could live any place they could. We were three days on the road. The first day a horse balked and my brother had to take it back home and get a horse that he knew would go. We only got to Spring Flat the first day. The next day the snow got so deep we couldn't travel any farther with the wagon so Josh Risley kept us that night and loaned us his bob sled to go the rest of the way.

We stayed there that night and they wouldn't hear of me going any farther until the men folks went in next day and found a cabin, cleaned it up and built a fire to warm it. They were very nice people so were all the people we met, I find the people so generous in a new country.

We get in there the next day all right and then my brother John had to take Mr. Risley's sled home and ride on one of the horses home and walk back to the woods. By the time John got back we had everything in its place and the timber located and plenty of fire wood cut.

The boys both understood working in timber and they made thousands of posts. I don't really know how many, I did know but have forgotten. We got Mr. McCracken to bring us home the last of February.

Brother John went back the last of that month to Clark Co. but he often

speaks of the good times we had and the hard work too for nothing. We only got a couple of loads of posts home until there came a great wind storm and blocked the roads and it was claimed that a forest fire burned all the posts up. The summer of 1882 we got along real well. We broke out about 30 acres of bunch grass but didn't get any crop off it till the next year. We had some garden and stayed home that year, winter rather, and on December 20, 1882, our oldest son Glidden was born so that three dear little tots for each one is just as dear as the first. The summer of '83 we raised some wheat to sell but times were still hard. We had quite a bit of expense, we proved up on the preemption and moved the house on the other side of the creek more than a mile and added another room. When winter came and nothing to bring in any money (Mr. Holbrook's brother Will was with us then) they concluded we would go to the mountains again. We didn't have a very warm house that winter, it was just a box house with the cracks battened.

We had lots of wood and plenty of fire but your back would chill while your face would burn. We had two rooms and an old cook stove in one room but it had been through a fire and wouldn't bake at all.

It was such a task to keep the little ones warm. The boys made some fence posts but not as many as they did before. The timber wasn't so plentiful, we didn't go back so far for fear the fires would destroy them again before the roads got dry enough to haul them out.

We came home on February 14, 1884. We had a real nice day for the trip but I never wanted to go back to the mountains to live in the winter while my children were small. Although I love the mountains I had one terrible scare while I was there with the children.



Along the Snake River, Whitman County

The house was built against a straight wall of earth that had been graded for that purpose. The fireplace was built between the house and the earth wall and filled in all around with rocks and earth to make it solid. The flue was only about a foot higher than the house and the bank the same height. You could go back of the house and find a trail that led right past the house and top of the flue and look down in the fireplace. The boys had gone to another camp and said they wouldn't be back that night. I wasn't afraid so I put the children to bed and they had gone to sleep, so I went to bed also. Just after I had gone to bed I heard something sniffing around the top of the flue. I made up my mind it must be a panther or cougar. I had heard many stories of them carrying children away, so I slipped out of bed and put some more wood on the fire.

I felt sure he wouldn't come down the flue while there was a good fire but if I kept much fire I would run out of wood before daylight. So I dressed myself and lay on the childrens bed with a loaded revolver or six shooter as the boys called it, with six rounds of ammunition in it until morning, except what time it took me to replenish the fire for my wood lasted until daylight but I didn't sleep or didn't try for I could hear it every little while. The next day when the boys came home they went out to find the cougar's tracks but all they found was an old cow's tracks near the flue and the cow was not far away. I saw her myself although I had not seen her before.

They found lots of lynx right close to the house but none near the flue. I must now go back to where I left off and tell my cougar story.

Mr. Holbrook got all the work that summer that he could do and I raised a fine garden. We had a fine wheat crop that fall and we never saw any more real hard times until the fall of 1893. That was remembered by all as it rained all harvest. Most everyone lost their wheat that year.

We got ours all headed and threshed between showers and we had no shelter for it, so we hired teams and used our own teams and took the wheat to the river and shipped it to Portland. I don't remember the number of bushels but had in over 200 acres of wheat and lost it all after we had paid freight onto Portland. We mortgaged our preemption to pay expenses.

The mortgate wasn't quite 1,000 dollars but it took the place, we still had the homestead left.

