

Sherman County Community & Township Directory

Norma Lewis of Centralia, Washington shares this account of a now-lost town of Sherman County. Norma's Grandmother Winifred M. Matney was born in April of 1895 at Early, to John B. and Alida (Lester) Matney. The Matney name was later given to a Wasco County community and we invite you to visit the Wasco County ORGenWeb Project site for more. Our thanks to Norma for this valuable addition.

Early, Sherman Co., Oregon

EARLY, Oregon was located 6 miles South from the original mouth of the John Day River on the Sherman County side of that river. When the John Day Dam went in, the overflow covered the site of Early, so it is no longer visible in any form - no buildings, no foundations, no nothing, just gone.

Around the turn of the century it was a bustling little town in Oregon wheat country. The highest and most visible building was the flour mill. Built by L.C. Cooper who came to Oregon in 1843 on the first big western wagon train, the mill was powered by a turbine using water from the John Day. The mill was later sold to George Wall and son Homer, but it was called 'The Middle of the Wheat Fields Mill' by the locals. Mrs. Wall was postmistress at Early from 1899 to 1917.

George Fox from Rufus c. 1960's recalled in an old newspaper clipping, living in Early as a boy and attending a one-room rural school of some 30 pupils. In 1906 he was in the second grade and his teacher was Ruth Wall, sister of Homer above. At the time this article was written he was looking at a faded photo of his former teacher standing on the four-foot wide swinging bridge across the John Day and commenting on her courage to stand up there long enough to have her photo taken. The bridge was 30 feet above the currents of the river and it was built to provide passage across the river from the Gilliam County side to the Sherman County side where the school and the town of Early was located. The bridge was supported by two-inch cables covered with 2 X 12 inch planks four feet long.

Flocks of sheep were driven across this bridge from one county to the next, and Indians on their ponies when the river was too high to ford.

"Once when Roy Philippi was crossing on his saddle horse, the horse lost his balance and fell over the side striking the rocks and bounced into the water. Roy escaped but the fall was fatal for the horse," George related.

Ice jams on that section of the John Day occurred frequently in winter months. George recalled the one in 1916 that came down the river after a sudden thaw and swept away everything in its path including the foot bridge. An ice jam could rise 50 feet before breaking loose.

This was a year of great snow and ice storms in January. George remarked you could hear the ice grinding and grumbling as it broke up heading for the Columbia.

"There's not a man alive who grew up near a stream of some kind that didn't find it a live thing of endless fascination. In my own boyhood this was a creek behind the school, usually quiet and sluggish, but filled with a variety of marine life, minnows and crawdads and the like. What a pleasure at recess in the spring and also during the cold months of winter when the ice made sliding a real delight."

In 1955 school mates from Early had a reunion with their teacher, Julia Woods Hansen who taught there

in 1899, when she presented each student with an ornate folder bearing the picture of the teacher and the names of the 30 students enrolled at Lower John Day grade school in 1899. The students who gathered from this class for the reunion were sisters Georgia Bowman, Leora Cheney who lived above Corbett, and Florence Ingle of Olympia (formerly Philippi); W. H. Fehrenbacher of Gresham; Henry Fehrenbacher of Portland, Frank Fehrenbacher and wife Mary of Waldport; Willie and Louis Aldridge of Milwaukee, Charlie Witchey of Blalock, Edith and Frank Clark, Lambert Clark, all of Portland. Mrs. Hansen received cards and calls from other students who were not able to make the reunion in 1955.

Winifred Matney Lewis Newton was also a student at this school, born in Early in 1895. She died in 1993 in Eugene, Oregon. She was the daughter of John B. and Alida (Lester) Matney. John's father also arrived in Oregon in 1843 from Missouri. This story was taken from newspaper clippings she had saved and found by her granddaughter, Norma Lewis. Most of these clippings were taken from The Dalles Chronicle.

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