

Pioneer woman confronts discrimination

(Final of four parts)

By Bob Zybach

David D. Fagan's "History of Benton County, Oregon" was published in 1885, barely 40 years after the arrival of the county's first pioneer settlers. The appendix to the 500-page book contains the biographies of more than 180 individuals considered by Fagan to be of importance to that time. No women are listed, nor are there any Indians, blacks, Chinese or Hawaiians. The list is made up entirely of white men, mostly businessmen and farmers.

Fagan is not unique among historians. The profession has featured a sexual and racial orientation through time that is very similar to that of a modern hockey team. It is somewhat understandable, then, that the focus of these individuals has been the lives and affairs of those not unlike themselves. In a very real sense, the study of history to this time has been little more than a chronology of white male lives as interpreted by themselves.

IN RECENT YEARS there has been an effort to reverse this trend by recognizing the contributions of women and other races in the establishment of our common heritage and culture, but the task has not been easy and will take some time. The textbooks and instructors given to our children have been the product of an earlier orientation, and recent efforts to focus upon the history of women and "minorities" have often seemed as racist and sexist as the viewpoints they have attempted to supplement or replace.

As a middle-aged white male historian, I share most of the problems in presenting a balanced appraisal of our past as those who have gone before me. Still, if we consider only those values and attributes traditionally deemed important when appraising the contributions of our ancestors — such things as courage, honor, honesty and pride earned through facing and overcoming adversity — it becomes

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SUCH A FORGOTTEN person is Letitia Carson, Benton County pioneer of 1846.

On April 5, 1845, several hundred pioneers heading for the Oregon Country met along the Wolf River in Missouri and formed the "Savannah Oregon Emigrating Society." The organization was established for the purpose of a safe and orderly journey to new homes and free land in the Willamette Valley. A constitution was drafted, fees collected, officers elected and a comprehensive census taken.

An Irish mountain man, David "Uncle Davy" Carson, was one of seven men elected to draw up resolutions for the new company. The census listed his party as containing one cow, eight oxen, two horses, four guns, 600 pounds of bacon, 600 pounds of flour, one wagon, three armed men and a woman. That woman was Letitia Carson, a 30-year-old former Kentucky slave, pregnant with Uncle Davy's child.

SOMEWHERE IN THE Rocky Mountains Letitia gave

birth to a baby girl, named Martha, whose descendants can still be found in California and in such Oregon towns as Salem and Adams. When the emigrants reached The Dalles it is believed that Letitia and the baby separated from David so that he could drive cattle along the old Indian Trail to the north of Mount Hood.

David's heroics have been detailed by Stephen Staats, an eminent politician in early Oregon. He recounted David's role in the establishment of the Barlow Road, a critical link in what has become known as the Oregon Trail.

Reuniting in the Willamette Valley, the family traveled to the Soap Creek Valley, where they built one of the very first cabins in Benton County, a few hundred yards from the present site of the OSU Beef Barns. In 1849 the couple produced a son, Andrew C. or "Jack Tish," believed to be the first person of African descent born in the county. For seven years the Carsons prospered, raising cattle and horses, until the fall of 1852, when David died following an illness.

GREEN BERRY SMITH, a neighboring pro-slavery landowner, was appointed executor of the estate. Refusing to recognize Letitia as either David's wife, or even his property, the family's possessions were tallied and sold at public auction. With the help of a sympathetic Corvallis lawyer, Andrew J. Thayer, Carson filed suit against Smith, demanding a share of the money from the auction.

Although the legal action took nearly five years to complete, and although Letitia ultimately gained a settlement in her favor, the local press virtually ignored the drama of a widowed black woman, deprived of legal standing and property rights by the laws of her adopted home, fighting a powerful and wealthy white man in a court of law. Whether or not her triumph was tarnished by the lack of public attention is unknown.

IN LATER YEARS Letitia



Douglas County Museum photo

Jack Carson, son of pioneer Letitia Carson, drives a team with a wagonload of lumber to a sawmill. Jack is believed to be the first person of African descent born in Benton county.

moved to Douglas County with her children, surviving as a midwife and as a farmer. In 1868 her daughter married into a prominent local French-Canadian family and later moved with her husband to the Umatilla Indian Reservation, where they raised a large family. Her son never married, but established a business in Myrtle Creek, where he built a home around 1900 that is still being used to this day.

Two creeks along the Umpqua River are named "Letitia."

One travels by the homestead she owned at the time of her death in 1888 and the other passes by the pioneer graveyard in which she is buried by the side of her son. A hand-carved monument, broken into three parts, marks her final resting place.

Summary

Over the past four weeks we have met, and gotten to know a little better, such interesting and influential Benton County pioneers as Letitia Carson, Reu-

ben Shipley, Eliza Gorman and Lou Southworth. How could we have ever forgotten them? For 100 years they have not been a part of our history. White children and Indian children have missed them every bit as much as Chinese children and black children. Our lives have been diminished by the loss.

Our parents and our children have not been allowed to have a laugh with Lou Southworth, to imagine the sweet strains of his violin playing "Home, Sweet Home" to lonesome gold miners in Jacksonville, or whipping up a "Virginia Reel" for dancing classes in 1850s Yreka. They have missed sharing the fear and pain of Letitia Carson giving birth to a baby girl in a wilderness, a thousand miles from home and freedom seeming ever more like an empty promise. There has been no chance to contemplate the wonder of 8-year-old Eliza Gorman, watching hardened adults respond to a buffalo stampede or to a feared Indian attack from 3,000 battle-dressed Sioux warriors.

How did these experiences affect the lives of these people? What role did these people then, in turn, play in the current shaping of this community? And what effect will our actions today have upon the Benton County of a hundred years from now? We cannot continue to ignore the past, any more than we can ignore the present.

We need to study history for reasons other than the entertainment and the intellectual stimulation that it provides us. By understanding how our ancestors responded to change, we can better anticipate and manage the changes that will come into our own lives. The study of history, then, should be both pleasant and practical.

It has been said that the past is important, but the future is even more important. Our shared experiences through time are the guides that take us into the future. The better we can understand and appreciate those experiences, the better our future is likely to be.

Bob Zybach is a historian and cultural resource specialist for OSU Research Forests.