This group portrait shows Captain James Blakely and his five sons. Clockwise from the top left they are Jim, Henry, Joseph, William, and George. The photograph is undated, but it was probably taken in the late 1890s.

James Blakely was born in Tennessee in 1812. He emigrated to Oregon in 1846, settling in Linn County and helping found Brownsville. Blakely formed a company of volunteers during the Rogue River War of 1855-1856, earning a commission as a captain. After the war he became prominent in the business affairs of Brownsville, helping build the town's first flour and woolen mills. He also operated a farm and ranch outside of Brownsville for most of his life. He and his wife Sarah had eleven children, including the five sons shown in the photograph above. Blakely died in 1914 at the age of 102.

Like their father, who represented Linn County in the Oregon legislature, four of Blakely's sons served in public office. In a 1939 interview, Jim Blakely recalled that in the mid-1880s “four of us boys were in public offices by election at the same time. I was sheriff of Crook county, Joe was sheriff of Gilliam county, Billy was sheriff of Umatilla county…and George was Wasco county judge at The Dalles where he has been in the drug business for 50 years.”

Jim Blakely, born in 1852, was the most famous of the five brothers. In the late 1870s Blakely started his own ranch near Prineville. In March 1882, local rancher Lucius Langdon killed two settlers in a dispute over property lines, sparking what Blakely later referred to as “a rule by gun and rope that is one of the blackest chapters in Oregon history.”

A group of local men organized a vigilance committee to avenge the deaths of the two settlers. After lynching Langdon and his hired man, the Vigilantes put the county under what was later described as a “reign of terror,” killing several men and threatening the lives of those who dared oppose them. Weary of the killings and the threats, Blakely helped organize an opposition group known as the “Moonshiners,” so called because they kept watch at night. His efforts helped end the reign of the Vigilantes. He was elected Crook County’s first sheriff in June 1884, serving two terms. He later moved to Wallowa County, where he again served two terms as sheriff. He died in 1953 at the age of 100.


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