

Oregon Spectator: the idyllic Willamette Valley farm

By David J. Schnebly

David J. Schnebly was the editor of the *Oregon Spectator*, the first newspaper published in Oregon Country (1846). His editorial reflects some issues and values of early Willamette Valley immigrants. Euro Americans began arriving in Oregon Country in large numbers during the early 1840s, attracted in part by exaggerated accounts of the valley's idyllic, Eden-like environment. By 1850, Oregon's non-Native population was more than 13,000. The Willamette Valley's Indian population had plummeted in the decades before Euro American settlement, dropping from as many as 14,000 people to fewer than 1,000. Many Natives were killed in the early 1830s by a malaria epidemic. The settlers' assumptions of cultural superiority caused many to view the decline and displacement of the Indians as a part of an inevitable "progress" toward "civilization." They optimistically established farms in the valley and utilized the area's natural resources for commercial gain.

In 1848, Oregon became a U.S. territory, and settlers lobbied Congress to legitimize the large land claims they had taken in the Willamette Valley. In 1850, the Donation Land Act was passed, allowing men to claim 320 acres and their wives to claim another 320 acres. Some men who had already claimed 640 acres quickly sought wives so they could, as the *Oregon Spectator* reported, "secure the *whole* [land] grant." At that time, there were few places in the nation where women had the right to own land. The 1862 federal Homestead Act would allow both single women and former slaves to claim land.

Further Reading: Robbins, William G. "Willamette Eden: The Ambiguous Legacy." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 99, 1998: 189-218.

Gloss, Molly. *The Jump-Off Creek*. Boston, Mass., 1989.

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