

Letters to the Editor

RANKIN CROW

BIG COUNTRY: WHERE PETE FRENCH WAS SHOT

WHEN I WAS 18 years old the year of 1918, my wife and I were working for C. Elliott, who had a contract with the Eastern Oregon Livestock Company to repair 40 miles of fence—restretch it, put four willow staves between each post, and also put in new juniper posts wherever needed. We were camped near the east end of Rockyford Lane where the Blitzen River crossed the Lane. There was a wooden bridge across the river and that was the main road from the Narrows to Diamond. Most of the travel in those days was by Model T Fords, teams of horses pulling wagons, and some buggies and buckboards. We always got our mail at the Narrows, which was approximately 15 miles from Rockyford Lane.

One Sunday morning in the fall of the year, I saddled up a horse and rode to the Narrows to get the mail. My father, Dave Crow, had bought hay and pasture for his cattle and moved them from Clover Swales to the Narrows for the winter, a distance of about 55 miles. He was living at the Narrows for the winter to take care of the cattle.

When I got to the Narrows that morning, I told my father I'd come to get the mail. He asked me to put up my horse while he cooked dinner, said he was going to Buena Vista ranch for the night and would saddle up his horse and ride along with me.

After I got the mail, we ate and started out, following the old road from the Narrows to the P Ranch and Buena Vista. We went along that road until we came to the foot of the Chalk Hills, about six miles from the Narrows. It was closer for me to go straight across the Sagebrush field to the camp at Rockyford Lane than to follow the road. So we rode through the gate at the foot of the Chalk Hills and started across the field toward the camp. When we came to another gate I got off and opened it, and started to get back on my horse. My father said, "Rankin, do you see that broken-off juniper post sticking up out of the ground over there?"

The post was approximately 3½ feet tall and probably 10 or 15 yards from the gate east of the fence that ran due north over Coyote Butte. At that time there was an old slough of water near the corner of the fence. My father told me that this was the place Peter French was killed, on Dec. 26, 1897. The first man to reach French after he was shot and had fallen from his horse was Emanuel Clark. Burt French, Pete's brother, was the second, and my father, who had also witnessed the shooting, was the third. Burt was trying to get Peter French to talk, but he was already dead. Father asked Burt if he would like to have him ride to Winnemucca and send a telegram with the news to Red Bluff, California.*

*David Crow's account of the shooting and his ride to Winnemucca appears in *Rankin Crow and the Oregon Country*, by Rankin Crow, as told to Colleen Olp, on pages 30-31.

Many people have asked me just what kind of a country Peter French was actually killed in, and what it looked like. The place is now part of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge. The road has never been graveled and it is difficult to get there by car unless the weather has been dry. On horseback, one can reach the place any time of year. A year or so ago my brother John and I went out to look for the spot, along with Bud Wilks of Ontario, who offered to take photographs.

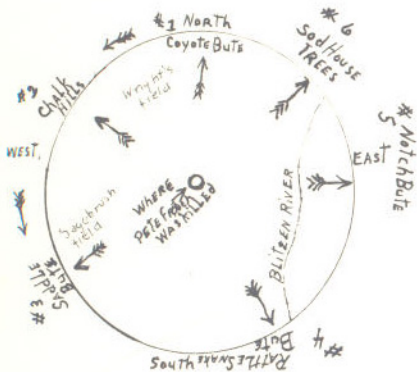
The fence that separated Wright's field from the Sagebrush field was gone, but we could see where it had been: the post holes have never filled with dirt because they were dug into the sod. I think they were set about a rod apart, but the gate that Pete French opened to let the cattle through was probably 25 or 30 feet wide. My brother and I already knew where the gate had been because our father had showed the place to us when we were gathering cattle in the Sagebrush field.

Evidence on the location of the place where Peter French was killed is as follows: My father told me that Andrea Littrell who lived at the Sod House brought a tent and set it up over French's body until the coroner could get there from Burns—about 40 miles. When Andrea was putting up the tent, he set a post in the ground to mark the place where French was killed. That post was there until the fence was removed. I told my brother John and Bud Wilks that there should be a post hole where Littrell had set the post to mark the spot. I had seen the post my father pointed out to me, as described before, many times, a few yards east of the gate. In a few minutes I found the post hole and put a can in the bottom. Bud Wilks stuck an old sagebrush stump in the hole which is visible in all the photos.

These photographs give a view of the country in a circle around the approximate location of the place where French was shot, and the map indicates direction of view. In picture No. 3 the mountain in the far distance is Jackie Butte; in No. 4 are what we called Buena Vista Rims; in No. 5 is Steens Mountain showing snow, and to the northeast is Riddel Mountain.

View No. 5, east toward Steens,
across Blitzen River and Notch Butte.





Rankin Crow's map of place where Pete French was killed.

[View No. 2 omitted; view No. 6 on p. 68.]