Palmer, Joel (1810-1881)

Joel Palmer, who first saw the Oregon Country in 1845 from a wagon, spent three decades participating in central events in Oregon's political history. At his death on June 9, 1881, the Portland *Weekly Standard* called him "a good and noble citizen," and the *Oregonian* noted he had given "the flower of his life for the best interests of Oregon."

Palmer spent just over half of his life in Oregon. In those years, he held federal office, served in the state house of representatives and senate, and ran for governor (1870). He founded the town of Dayton in Yamhill Valley, and his name is on the Oregon landscape in Palmer Glacier on Mt. Hood, Palmer Peak in Multnomah County, Palmer Lake and Palmer Creek in Yamhill County, and Palmer House in Dayton, which is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Born in Canada in 1810 to American parents—Quakers who had emigrated in 1803—Palmer grew up in upstate New York after the family returned to the United States during the War of 1812. He received only a few years of formal education before his parents indentured him out at age twelve to labor for a Quaker family in the Catskill Mountains, where he worked in a mill until age sixteen.

By 1836, Palmer had moved to Philadelphia, married, lost his first wife to death, married fellow Quaker Sarah Ann Derbyshire, and moved west to Laurel, Indiana. In Laurel, he worked as a contractor on canal-building projects. He also served two terms in the Indiana legislature as a Democrat, before deciding to travel the Oregon Trail in 1845.

Palmer took the risk of overland travel to Oregon, he later explained, to discover the region and "whether its advantages were sufficient to warrant me in the effort to make it my future home." He described his experiences in *Journal of Travels*, a popular travel guide to the Oregon Trail, published in Cincinnati in 1847.

The most remarkable sequence in *Journal of Travels* is his ascent of Mt. Hood. When he reached an elevation of 9,000 feet, he was able to scout out a wagon route around the mountain that became the Barlow Road. He returned to Indiana in 1846 to gather up his family, including children ages eleven, nine, seven, four, and two years, for travel back to Oregon as captain of a large wagon train. The Palmers settled in the Yamhill Valley in 1847.

Palmer became a political leader during several years of conflict between Indian tribes and aggressive settlers and miners, first as commissary general of volunteer militia in a campaign against Cayuse Indians in December 1847, when he gained the sobriquet "General." He was Oregon Provisional government peace commissioner to the Cayuse, superintendent of Indian Affairs in 1848, and superintendent for Indian Affairs for Oregon Territory in 1853-1856.

His duties brought Palmer into contact with many Indian people, including members of Cayuse, Walla Walla, Umatilla, Yakama, Warm Springs, Tenino, Rogue (Takelma, Chastacosta, and Shasta), Siletz, Umpqua, Kalapuya, and Chetco tribes. He negotiated nine treaties between 1853 and 1855 and two additional treaties with Isaac Stevens, but his characterization of whites as the provocateurs in most conflicts with Native people angered many citizens and resulted in his dismissal as superintendent of Indian Affairs in 1856.

In politics, Palmer came to Oregon a Democrat; but by the time of the Civil War, he had become a Republican and an active Unionist. Yamhill County voters elected him to the Oregon House of Representatives in 1862, where he served as Speaker, and sent him to the Oregon Senate for two years in 1864. He nearly became U.S. senator to succeed James Nesmith in 1866 but withdrew his name from consideration because it would have meant leaving his state Senate seat, an action he considered illegal and unethical. Republicans endorsed him for state governor in 1870, an election he lost to Democrat Lafayette Grover by 671 votes of 22,821 cast.

Palmer tried his hand at the California gold rush in 1849, but he put more effort into pioneering an overland trail to British Columbia goldfields in 1858. Four years later, he joined others to secure a state charter for a toll road up the Columbia River to compete with the Barlow Road. In the same year, he became a director in ventures at Willamette Falls, including development of a canal and locks.

Palmer returned to government service briefly in 1871, when he accepted appointment as Indian agent at the Siletz Indian Reservation. After less than two years, he became frustrated with bureaucracy and his inability to aid the Siletz people and resigned his post.

At his death in 1881, Palmer left eight children, his wife Sarah, who died in 1891, and a modest estate—and also a reputation as a defender of Indian people.

Written by William L. Lang

Further Reading:

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