Peter French Round Barn

Standing clear on a low rise in a sagebrush-dotted expanse of the eastern Oregon rangeland is the round barn built by Peter French and his P Ranch cowhands (*vaqueros* or *Californios* who came north from the central valley) in 1883 or 1884. The structure, located about thirteen miles south of Malheur Lake and fifty miles southeast of Burns, is not a barn in the usual sense but a large, enclosed corral. Originally one of three such barns on the P Ranch, it is the sole surviving round barn of a cattle and horse-raising operation that once spread over more than 150,000 acres in the Blitzen Valley.

The barn was built to provide covered space for training and exercising horses during the winter. The French livestock operation in the 1880s and 1890s was so extensive that nearly three hundred horse and mule colts were born each year; and while some were sold, most were trained for use on the sprawling ranch. During the bitter winter season, young horses and mules could be trained inside the barn for riding and freight hauling, and mature horses could be exercised in the covered circular paddock.

Measuring roughly 100 feet in diameter, the barn is supported by 29 peeled juniper poles around the periphery. Fifteen feet inside this ring, a circular stone wall encloses the corral, one and a half feet thick and 64 feet in diameter, rising to about 9 feet. Two large gate openings and 14 wood-framed windows measuring about 3 feet by 2 feet punctuate the inner stone wall.

Inside the masonry wall are 14 peeled juniper poles. At the center is a single 25-foot-high central peeled juniper pole from which radiate 15 diagonal braces. The braces support plate beams that in turn support 30 radiating center rafters. The encircling 14 posts also carry diagonal braces and plate beams, and a short wood frame rises from the stone corral wall to support the roof rafters.

Aside from the juniper posts, which were obtained locally, all the wood framing and walls were built with sawn Ponderosa pine dimensional lumber believed to have been hauled by French's own freight wagons from a sawmill operated by A.H. Robie on Coffee Pot Creek near Fort Harney, east of Burns and more than thirty-six miles to the north. The lumber might also have come from the Fort Bidwell sawmill in California.

Vertical boards nailed to horizontal skirt boards just above the ground make up the outermost ring wall, except for open spaces between nine of the outer posts on the east side. Wood battens cover the joints between the outer wallboards. Facing roughly northeast is a broad, low gable in the roof over an opening aligned with one of the gates in the stone corral wall. The broad, low-pitched, conical roof is covered with red cedar shingles; the roof has been re-shingled three times, most recently in 2010.

Because of its solid construction, this unique horse-training barn remains a testament to the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the practically minded Pete French and his small group of Mexican and American *vaqueros*.

After French's death in 1897, ownership of P Ranch passed to the French-Glenn Livestock Company, on what was then called the Barton Lake Ranch. In the early 1920s, the barn was acquired by the Jenkins family, who used it for several decades for grain and equipment storage until the family donated it to the Oregon Historical Society. The barn was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1971.

Today, having been stabilized and restored under the direction of the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, the Peter French Round Barn is administered by the Oregon State Parks system and is open to the public.

Written by Leland Roth

Further Reading:

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