Philip Sheridan (1831-1888)

Before he gained fame as commander of the Army of the Potomac during the Civil War, Philip Henry Sheridan served in Oregon on the Columbia River and at the Grand Ronde Reservation.

In August 1855, Sheridan commanded a cavalry detachment assigned to a survey team that was laying out a railway route from Fort Reading, California, to Portland. The following spring, he and his detachment were ordered to relieve the Ninth Infantry, who were under attack by a group of Indian warriors at the blockhouse at the Middle Cascades of the Columbia River.

The Yakama, Klickitat, and Cascade Indians were fighting the U.S. Army to defend their homeland in what became known as the Yakima War, which would last until 1858. After some brief skirmishes, Sheridan captured the retreating Cascade Indians, including men, women, and children. The captives included nine Cascade Indians who were reportedly ringleaders of an attack on March 26, 1856, in which fourteen settlers were killed—an event later dubbed the Cascade Massacre. The captured Cascade leaders, including Chief Chenoweth, were tried and executed.

In April 1856, Sheridan took command of Fort Hoskins on the Coast Reservation and Fort Yamhill on the Grand Ronde Reservation. His companies had been assigned to the new reservations to prevent the Indians from returning to their homelands and to keep lawless settlers away from the relocated tribes. The forts were strategically placed to guard the mountain passes and to protect the easiest access to and from the reservations.

In 1856, Sheridan and Superintendent of Indian Affairs Joel Palmer located a site for Fort Hoskins, a new fort in King's Valley, the middle post of the Coast reservation. Early the next year, Sheridan arrived at Fort Yamhill from Fort Vancouver with a detachment of thirty-two men from Company D, 3rd Artillery and Company H, 4th infantry. They remained at the reservation for six weeks, until Company K arrived to relieve them. Sheridan was then permanently reassigned to Company K and was given the task of building the quarters for the men and officers at the fort. He employed civilians and Indians as laborers during the construction.

Company K remained at Fort Yamhill for four years. Sheridan was promoted to captain in May 1861, and Company K was relieved by the Ninth infantry on June 20, 1861. After his relief arrived at Fort Yamhill on September 1, 1861, Sheridan left Oregon to enter the Civil War. While at the Grand Ronde Reservation, Sheridan had purchased 1,200 acres jointly with another officer near the reservation. He sold the land in 1867 but kept his own house.

Lieutenant General Sheridan returned to Oregon in 1875, now a Civil war hero, with his wife Irene Rucker and his brother Colonel Michael Sheridan. In Salem, he stayed at the Chemeketa Hotel and met with Oregon Governor Lafayette Grover, an old friend. He then visited the Grand Ronde Reservation and the former site of Fort Yamhill, which had been decommissioned in 1866.

On July 1, 1888, Sheridan was promoted to General of the Army, the highest rank in the U.S. Army. He died that year of a short illness. His name is memorialized in Oregon by the city bearing his name in Yamhill County. Sheridan holds the annual Phil Sheridan Days in June, and his house remains on the site of Fort Yamhill.

Written by David Lewis

Further Reading:

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