

History of Wapello

By: Mrs. Elijah Clark

Wapello is situated six miles northeast of Blackfoot on the line of the railroad and Yellowstone highway. It was settled by homemakers, tho they took land under pre-emption rights, timber culture claims, desert claims and homesteads.

Some of the early settlers were the Corbetts, Sheridans and Amers; some of the later ones were of the name of Fox, Whitten, Howard, Bithel, Bennett, Hess, Hutchinson, Montgomery, John Kater, Oscar Kain, Cicero Goggins, Ivie Brothers, George Locey, the Mackies, Sjostroms, Zeiglers, Bates, Rumbles, Malms, George Robethans, T. R. Jones, Andersons, Frakers, Heatons. In early days when settlers needed horse shoes they gathered what they wanted at the site of the blacksmith shop south of the Corbet station.

When the railroad was built thru in early 1879 a siding was laid and it was later known as Howard switch. Long afterwards, Mrs. Louis Anderson who lived at the John Q. Stone place was appointed postmaster and she named it Wapello, her home town in Iowa. Mr. Godfrey Malm did not like the way she pronounced it, and called it Wa-pel-lo, accenting "pel". His pronunciation is still in effect. A star route was established to carry mail from Wapello to Presto, and Thomas and Walter Bithel were the contractors.

About the year 1888 Presly Fox came from the Sacramento valley and began acquiring all the land he could for himself and his sister Mrs. A. Whitten. He acquired 900 acres in the Riverside district, 800 at Goshen, 800 at Wapello which was then only a flat and was spoken of as part of the sandhills, 320 acres in the present sugar farm south of Kimball and 200 acres in the sandhills, making 3120 acres total. He built what was known as the Fox canal conveying water from the Blackfoot river and later promoted and paid for most of the construction work on Blackfoot Irrigation canal, and was a stockholder in the Dar skin Ditch company.

In the later eighties a school house was built on Mr. Fox's farm about a mile north of the switch. Some of the early teachers were Robert McCracken, Byrd Trego, Sam Staley, Ben Boling, Miss Denman, Mr. Atkinson, M. D. Andrus.

In the summer of 1905 a larger school house was built on the northeast corner of the Howard farm. It was finished on August 14 and was burned down in the fall of 1906. They moved the old Fox school house to the school grounds and used it four years when a larger brick structure was built. The old frame house was moved across the road where it still stands, having been used as a store by Ben Muir, Arthur Scott, W. P. Ramsey and W. D. Stone.

In December 1910 a new two-room school house was completed, and in the fall of 1916 two more rooms and a hall and library. In the fall of 1936 a water system and a stoker were installed in the school house. The enrollment ranges from 115 to about 150. W. T. Bithel, Frank Berlin and A. T. Tucker are the trustees. Mr. Bithel was elected trustee when he was 21 years old and has been on the board ever since. One of the teachers, Miss Blackhart, became his wife and they still devote much study to school interests.

The townsite was laid out in 1909 and the ward was cut off of the Kimball ward the same year. J. L. Wheeler was the presiding elder and Moroni Mecham and C. A. Merkley were early bishops. The church was finished in 1911. It was equipped with gas lighting and in 1912 a leak or an open jet resulted in the building being destroyed by fire and Lavern Merkley narrowly escaped death when he walked in and lit a match. The building was replaced in 1914 with a five-thousand dollar building. The general church treasury furnished half of the money and the community the rest. Each boy over fourteen gave five dollars, each one over eighteen gave ten. Adults were assessed from \$25 to \$80 each and many of them donated labor besides. They stayed within their means and when it was completed it was paid for and ready to dedicate.

Wapello people were the first ones to suggest and put into operation the free delivery of The Daily Bulletin thru the service of school buses.

A Wapello man, P. J. Williams, is given mention in another column of this paper for distinguished service advancing the government postal service in the Blackfoot country. It appears under the history of rural mail delivery, route one. Long ago the scattered settlers of the Wapello country conducted a rabbit drive and had the corral on the spot where Mr. Williams' dwelling stands. There they corralled six thousand jack rabbits in the grand closing-in, and white people and Indians from the reservation hauled them away by wagon loads.

When the Whitten family settled on the Wapello flats, the present Parley Price ranch, they erected a large house, large corrals and shelters for stock, set aside a large tract for garden and orchard, planted a windbreak of poplars and immediately began raising great quantities of vegetables and followed up with fruits. When people from other ranches came, and especially the new settlers who were very poor, Mrs. Whitten would give them a quantity of whatever was ready for use. Nothing short of several dollars worth would satisfy Mrs. Whitten, and if she knew there were children at the new home and signs of poverty, she heaped up more for them. They had a lot of Ben Davis apples and in those days even Ben Davis apples were a rare treat. A heavy storm came when it was picking time and shook off loads of them. There were indications of a sharp freeze that night and the Whittens spent the evening raking and carrying the apples to a heap in the open. They raked up leaves and anything and then covered them temporarily. As the weather grew colder they increased the covering and in the spring when they opened the mound those old Ben Davis apples were the delight of all the neighborhood. The soil had taken out the bitter and made them delicious.

On ordinary occasions Mrs. Whitten would can great quantities of fruits and vegetables more than her family could possibly use, and as visitors came, she would tender them a few gallons of canned apples or tomatoes or what-not and have the husky Whitten boys put them in the visitors vehicle. Mr. and Mrs. Whitten have passed on as have also most of those early settlers, but their fine deeds live on in the memory of middle-aged people who were children in the homestead days.