

Elyse: We left Portland and headed out towards the coast for our next investigation, in the Willamette Valley. Our story starts in the 1850s. Groups of white settlers are heading west to seek their fortune and a new life. To make way for the settlers, American Indian tribes all over the country are being forcibly removed from their homelands. Over 100,000 Native Americans are uprooted and placed on reservations in a policy that devastated their communities. Here in the Willamette Valley, in Central Oregon, this leads to the creation in 1855 of the Grand Ronde reservation. A year later, three U.S. Military Forts are built around the edges of the Grand Ronde. These imposing structures dominate the surrounding countryside. Today, this quaint, old house is believed to be all that remains of the biggest fort, Fort Yamhill. For years, locals have heard stories about what happened at Fort Yamhill and why it was put there. Now, a local woman wants some answers. What role did these menacing structures play in the settling of this part of the West? April Wooden has lived within a few miles of the Fort site for many years.

April: I'm very interested in local history because I want to know what people went through and what their struggles were and what their dreams were and how they survived.

Elyse: I'm Elyse Luray, and I've come to Oregon to meet April and piece together this story of the Old West. So tell me, why is this house so important to you?

April: I have a family connection to this house. My husband's great-great-grandfather was supposed to have been the finish carpenter for the buildings here at Fort Yamhill. And this is the surviving building.

Elyse: What did he work on?

April: He built the doors and the window sashes for all of the buildings here.

Elyse: Interesting. And what can I tell you?

April: I would like to know how this location was chosen for Fort Yamhill and what its purpose was. None of the records that I have been able to access really explain that. And I would find that real interesting.

Elyse: The formation of the Grand Ronde reservation in 1855 followed a firmly established pattern. Over 20 Indian bands from all over Oregon were removed from their homelands and relocated to a 60,000-acre site in the Willamette Valley. The Umpqua, the Rogue River, and the Southern Molalla bands came from Southern Oregon. The Calapooia came from Central Oregon and the Tillamook came from the north. These were just some of the tribes uprooted. The removal process is one of the darkest passages of American history. But what role did this little house play? The first thing to do is examine the physical evidence. April believes the house was part of Fort Yamhill, but it looks early 20th century to me. It's certainly not from the 1850s. Oregon state parks department want to turn the site of Fort Yamhill into a state park. For the last year, they've employed architectural historian Greg Olson, an authority on 19th-century architecture in Oregon, to investigate the origins of the house.

Greg: This isn't easily done. But it's really important to do it this way so you don't ruin the information. When he removed the surface paneling, he made an interesting discovery. This indeed looks like 1915.

Elyse: Is that what the whole house looked like?

Greg: The whole house. The roof, see the Dutch colonial work is from 1915. But when you take this off, you

get this. You can date this board to 1850s, no problem.

Elyse: How do you know that these are period?

Greg: We know from the saw marks. The way they did milling in the 1850s in these remote locations, they had a saw that would do vertical lines. It was a sash saw that went up and down like this. Then, because you know you're standing on the ground of the Fort, you got to wonder if it's a Fort building. And then you go look at the Fort literature.

Elyse: Greg found an 1860s floor plan for the officers' quarters from another military Fort.

Greg: We've got the Davidson map of 1864. It shows this side hall and the front and the back rooms. The plans are almost identical to the original layout of this house.

Elyse: We can conclude from that that this is definitely an officers' quarters?

Greg: I believe that's true.

Elyse: But what did the rest of Fort Yamhill look like in the 1850s? Kristen Stauman from the Oregon Parks Department shows me a map that recreates the ground plan of the original Fort.

Kristen: There were six buildings that served as officers' quarters. Our little house is one of them. And you can see here this was kind of a major Fort. It has lots of buildings. There's 23 buildings here. There's - - where we're sitting right now is where the block house would have been. There was commissary, guard house, adjutants, company quarters, mess hall, kitchen. There was probably over a hundred soldiers here stationed during that time when it was a -- when the Fort was active.

Elyse: I mean, look at this. You have a hospital. You have a bake house. You have laundress quarters, stables. It's almost like four city blocks long. It's clear that Fort Yamhill represented a substantial investment by the U.S. Military. But what was its purpose? The Knight Library at the University of Oregon is a place Wes went to research John Ainsworth in the pocket watch story. It has a collection of original documents dating back to the settling of the Oregon territory. I'm hoping I'll find some answers here. I'm looking here at a memoir from an Oregon Indian agent. And it says here that a man named General Joel Palmer "Was the first superintendent of Indian affairs for the Oregon territory." I discover that the library has an extensive collection of Palmer's official and personal papers. Here's a transcript of a speech Palmer made in 1855 to the leaders of several northwest coastal tribes. "Experience has taught us that the white man and the red man cannot always live together in peace. There soon will be a great many white man. We cannot prevent them from coming and settling in your country. If an Indian sees a piece of ground and wishes to live on it, it will be a little while when the white man comes and sees it. The white man says, 'I want this land. You go away and far away.'" As you'd expect of a government official, Palmer is telling the American Indians they have no choice but to sign over their lands and move to the reservations. But then I find other documents that might put Palmer's role in a different light. It's a letter to Palmer's superiors written a year before the Fort was created. "It will be well nigh impossible to save the Indians of this valley from the fury of the inhabitants. Their guilt or innocence will not be the subject of inquiry. The fact that they are Indians will be deemed deservingly of death." Strong language for a white government bureaucrat. Was Palmer really so sympathetic to the plight of the Native Americans? Then I discover an official U.S. Military document explaining how Fort Yamhill was created. In it, Palmer is quoted informing his superiors of "The existence of a war of extermination by our citizens against all Indians in southern Oregon." Palmer goes on to say that the only way to save the lives of the Native Americans is to establish a reservation at Yamhill guarded by the military. Palmer is implying

that the Fort was built to protect the Native Americans, but given the climate of the time, that is impossible. Did Palmer really believe what he was saying, or is this just propaganda to get the Native Americans to do what his government wanted? I need to know more about the reservation experience from the perspective of Native Americans themselves. We contacted the confederated tribes of the Grand Ronde, but they declined to participate. We've asked Dr. George Wasson, a coquille tribal elder, to give his perspective on this part of Native American history. He spent the last 25 years researching and documenting the history of the northwest coastal tribes. Tell me about the removal process.

George: It was very painful, being moved out of their traditional home environment. Their whole existence, their identity, their family names, the names of the places where they lived, where they gathered, where they had their ceremonies, it was all right there around them. And once you move them away from that, they become nothing.

Elyse: What was the white settlers' response to the Native Americans moving onto the reservations?

George: Well, you know, some people thought the best thing to do was simply exterminate them and that it was a waste of money to assign a reservation and put them there. They wanted them completely out of the country or gone.

Elyse: I read that Joel Palmer created the reservations in an attempt to avoid violence and conflict. What do you think about that?

George: Well, it's obvious that people were being badly slaughtered, and Palmer could not control the vigilantes, the miners, the frontiersmen. So his only option was to get them out of harm's way. It was the, the lesser of evils. I don't know if he actually knew what kind of trauma it was going to be for them. But I do have the feeling that Joel Palmer really wanted to do what was, what was best.

Elyse: So where did the military post like Fort Yamhill fit in?

George: It's obvious they were there to keep them confined in the, pardon me, concentration camps. It's difficult to call them reservations. They were death camps. Over at Yachats, about 50% of them died in the first few years. The government was not sending them any food or supplies.

Elyse: Even when the food or supplies did come, there was usually too little, and they were often late. They were assuring the white people, the settlers, that the Indians were going to be contained. Dr. Wasson makes it clear that the reservations were prison camps with the soldiers as guards. Archaeologist Dr. David Brauner has been excavating one of two other Forts that surrounded the Grand Ronde reservation. I'm hoping he'll be able to tell me precisely what the soldiers did on a day-to-day basis.

David: Well, the soldiers' most common role would be to pursue any Indians that came off the reservation. If they came off the reservation without a permit, to pursue traditional hunting and gathering, the soldiers were always to track them down, round them up and bring them back to the reservation.

Elyse: So the real reason for the military being present was to keep the Indians on the reservation, as it always had been. Any conflict that arose on the reservations, the soldiers were called over to take care of the conflict.

David: And they had the authorization to take any means possible to solve the problem.

Elyse: What was the military's feeling towards the Native Americans?

David: Most of these soldiers had no use for the Indians. They didn't like them, and they would just as soon that they would disappear as well.

Elyse: After all the talk, I wanted to see some hard evidence of the things I discovered. So I went back to the Knight Library. The first thing I find is this list of reservation regulations drawn up on October 13, 1855. "No Indian will be permitted to leave his designated encampment unless by special permit. Any Indian found outside his designated temporary reservation will be arrested and detained in custody as long as deemed necessary." This document makes it clear that the reservation Native Americans were seen simply as inmates. And the author? It was Joel Palmer, superintendent Indian affairs. So whatever his personal beliefs, Palmer dutifully carried out his official task to confine the Native Americans on a reservation so that the whites could settle Central Oregon unimpeded. After learning more about this sad time in our history, the quaint little house certainly takes on a whole new identity. What was it like for Native Americans forced onto the reservation to encounter Fort Yamhill for the first time? I returned to the house to meet Greg Olson, our architectural historian. During his research, he discovered a book that describes the fort as it was in the 1860s.

Greg: There were six of these buildings, all whitewashed, and they were in a very straight line at the top of this hill, towering down the hill over the Indians. It would have been an amazing architectural impact, like a fence, which they weren't to cross. The Fort occupied the sloping top of a great hill which, standing at the gateway of the Grand Ronde Valley, was naturally adapted for military occupation. On the east, too, a phalanx of firs scaling the rugged heights waved their green plumes over a row of neat, white cottages occupied by the officers, all marvelously white in their constantly refreshed coats of whitewash. On the western side of the quadrangle stood the regulation block house, strong, dark, menacing. It gives a sense of this thing that would have been totally different than anything the Indians had ever seen and really spelled out the way that things were going to be from then on. You're sitting down there and you're looking up and you see all this, you know. What can you think except look at these people, this power, and -- it was never going to be the same again... For those people.

Elyse: Now it's time to tell April everything I've learned. It's been quite a journey. You know, you asked me this very simple question, and I realized there really wasn't a simple answer. It seems that the main purpose of Fort Yamhill was to separate the Native Americans from the white settlers. It served as a containment for the Native Americans. It kept them on the reservation. It policed them. It wasn't a real proud period in the history of this area. Oppressing a people is never a proud part of our history. The nice thing about what we have here with this house is, we have a tangible piece of history. And no matter what it represents, it's still our history.

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