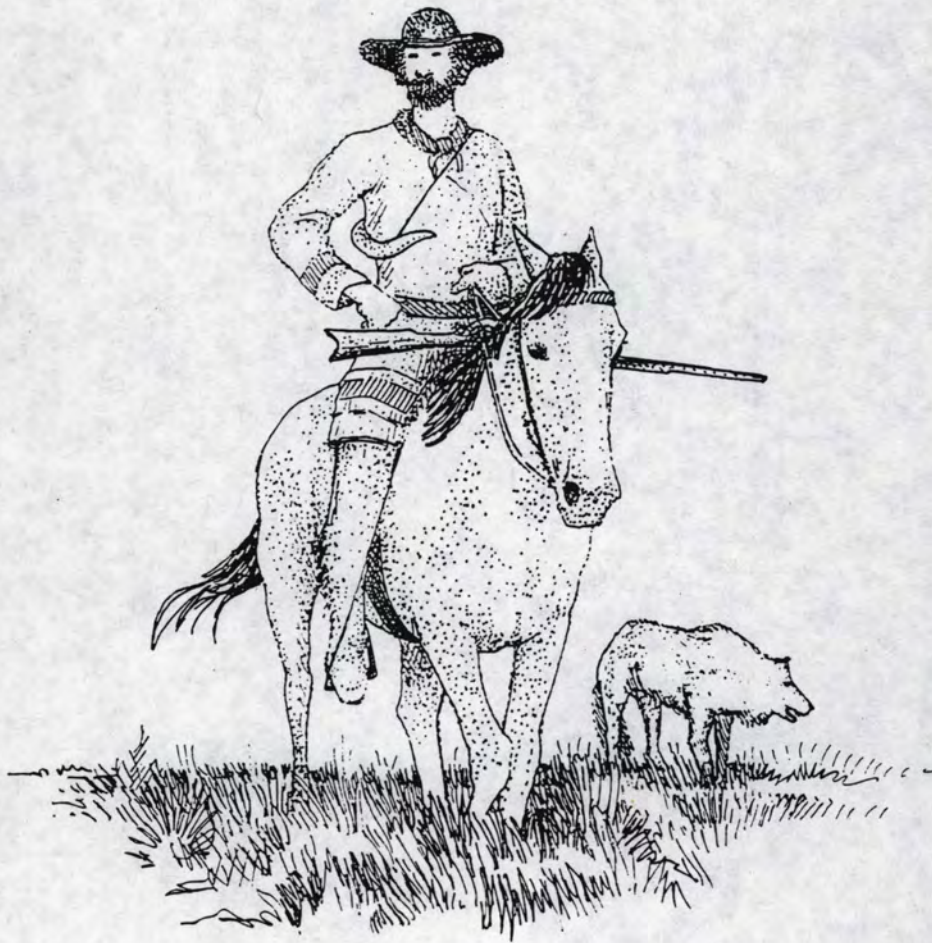


SHADOWS ON THE TRAIL

The Story of Jim Summers and Other
Settlers in the Weiser River Country
on the Payette National Forest

by
Sheila D. Reddy



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The trails were old. They wound their way north from the Snake River, through the lower, middle and upper valleys of the Weiser River. Every summer bands of Shoshoni, Weiser, Paiute, Cayuse, Umatilla, and Nez Perce Indians gathered to trade and race horses. Friendly tribes and bands would gather to compare information, or just socialize in the locality known to the Shoshoni as "sehewoki'i," or "willows standing in rows like standing water."

Josephine Thorpe's people were Shoshoni originally from the Payette River country. She recalls how they lived long ago:

They just lived well, they and their friends there. Scattered through the mountains there, many would arrive with them and eat with them, and several might sleep with them. Again, they would come, and they would do anything for them (Crum & Dayley 1993:220).

Early in the 1800's, trappers found the valleys of the Weiser while searching for beaver. In 1832, the Hudson Bay Company built Fort Boise near the mouth of the Boise River and the Snake, where traders bought furs and sold supplies to trappers and Indians. In 1837, Francois Payette became Master of the Post at the fort. In 1839, after Thomas Farnham rode through the log gates he recorded:

Mr. Payette, the person in charge at Boisais [sic], received us with every mark of kindness; gave our horses to the care of his servants, and introduced us immediately to the chairs, table, and edibles of his apartment...The 14th and 15th [September] were spent very pleasantly with this gentlemen. During that time he feasted us with excellent bread, and butter made from an American cow, obtained from some missionaries; with baked, boiled, fried and some broiled salmon--and, at my request, with some of his adventures in the wilderness (Farnham 1843:73).

By the late 1840's, wagon trains followed the Oregon Trail through Southern Idaho. Those going to Oregon crossed the Snake River near Farewell Bend, their cattle and horses stripping Southern Idaho bare as they passed. But, it would be the gold seekers of the 1860's, swarming by the thousands over Idaho the Territory, that would change it forever.

One of those miners was James Hazen Summers. According to the United States 1880 Census for the Pine Valley and Heath Districts in Washington County, Idaho Territory, Jim Summers was born in Crab Orchard, Kentucky in 1835. When the young Kentuckian was about seventeen years old he and his cousin crossed the plains, heading for the California gold fields.

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In Idaho he would be remembered as a quiet man, but a man with an intense hatred for Indians. Weiser Judge Frank Harris told Summers' story in his book History of Washington County and Adams County (1940):

I often talked with him [Summers] and he told me of some experiences he had with Indians...His hatred for Indians got its birth when he was working one of his claims in California. One day an Indian shot from the brush and mortally wounded Summers' cousin. He thought it the act of a single Redman or he would have been shot at the same time. From that day on, Summers held every Indian a hostage. He joined the volunteers in southern Oregon during the Indian war.

Summers came East of the Cascades in the early 1860's to Canyon City [Oregon] and on to the Snake River. He had headquarters at Pine Creek, in Pine Valley. Later in life, he prospected on Brownlee Creek in Washington County, and owned the Gallena Mines north of Cuddy Mountain. An old friend of his, named Ed Wilkerson, furnished money and supplies for Summers to develop mining claims on Rapid River and Gallena (Harris 1940:60).

Summers wasn't alone in his passion against the Indians. As whites moved into the traditional homelands of Idaho's tribes, the Indians rebelled. The Native lifestyle was one that needed a great landscape to support a people totally dependent on nature for food and all other necessities of life. This included their sacred places and traditional trading and gathering sites that helped to maintain the Indian's cultural identity.

As early as 1863, letters were being written to the head of the Territorial Government objecting to the Indians reactions to their lands being taken over. Governor of Idaho Territory, W. H. Wallace received this letter signed by several miners:

Your petitioners would respectfully show that on the 21st day of November 1863, while in pursuit of their daily labors as Miners on the Bank of the Snake River, they were threatened by Indians to take their lives, and every indications showed that the[y] intended to take the lives of the miners on that River, and that we was compelled to abandon our claims for fear the[y] would execute their threats (Territorial Records, Box 1, file 30).

The Indian's anger at finding the white miners at their traditional wintering camps along the Snake River in late November is understandable if viewed in hindsight. Seasonal rounds of Native bands concluded in late fall when they regrouped along major rivers. Moderate temperatures combined with easily gathered drift-wood and grazing for horses could mean the difference between survival or death for members of the tribe. Winter camps along the Snake River had been used traditionally for thousands of years by the Nez Perce, Paiutes, and for the last thousand years by

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Shoshoni bands.

Recent arrivals, the miners and settlers had no concept of the Indians lifeway or of being the intruders. Tensions increased as whites built fences and began plowing ground where Indians had traditionally dug camas, bitterroot, wild onion, kouse, and other plants vital to staying alive.

White anger festered when Indians raided their horse herds. The results were often deadly for both Indians and whites. On April 25, 1865, fifty miners and settlers petitioned the Territorial Government in a letter stating:

Indians have committed several depredations upon the road leading to Walla Walla and Umatilla: that they...in the night took and carried away a train of mules [30] belonging to Mr. Dunhill & Bros., and at the same time carried off some 18 head of horses belonging to Miller at "Miller Ranch," that these depredations were near "Olds Ferry" on the Snake River. Dunhill with a party of eight men pursued the Indians about 125 miles from Olds Ferry, up the Malheur & the other side, then came across the Indians and were attacked by them. One white man was wounded & the party being small, they were compelled to return. And we understand, by reliable authority that other raids have been made upon the road (Territorial Records Box 1, file 5).

On May 15, 1865, another group petitioned, relating the same story and adding:

The same party state that they saw between three & four hundred horses and mules in the possession of the Indians during the time they were engaged fighting them. Mr. Bledsoe, Wells Fargo & Co.'s messenger, reports also that the Indians have stolen two horses from Mr. Thomas' Stage Station, Powder River Valley belonging to the Stage Co.

Seven Indians were seen near Hawkins Ranch, Burnt River, on the 7th of May, and on the night of May 10th, the Stage came on a party of Indians near Express Ranch, who fled over the hills in the direction of Snake River (ibid.)

The rule developed to shoot first and ask questions later. Judge Harris told two stories related to him by Jim Summers.

He [Summers] told of killing two [Indians] on Crooked River. He was setting on a log one day when the Indians passed up the trail, both carrying packs. One was a large young buck, and the other was a smaller, older man. Jim shot the big one, who was in the lead and as the old Indian turned to see where the shot came from, Summers let him have it. He looked over his kill and found the Indians were carrying pressed bear meat. A large pine had been uprooted nearby, so he dragged the bodies into the cavity and covered them with sticks and stones.

Several years afterward, he was passing the same trail, so

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looked to see if the bones of the Indians were still there. He happened to look up beyond the tree to see the largest bear he had ever laid his eyes on in this country, and he had seen and killed many of them. Remembering that the Indians he killed were packing bear meat, and seeing the live bear on the spot he had shot them, gave the old miner a real scare. As he was armed with only a .44, he knew that a shot would only enrage the animal. It was with much relief he saw the huge bear drop to the ground and lope away in characteristic fashion (Harris 1940:60).

On May 8, 1873, the citizens of Salubria City wrote to the Governor asking that he send 40 guns and ammunition. They added: You are aware that we live in a sparsely settled portion of Idaho, and that Indians congregate here in large numbers every summer. And we feel the necessity of organizing for mutual protection. We would suggest that D.A. Logan be named as Captain and John G. Curtis as Lieutenant (Territorial Records Box 1, file 89).

On September 13, 1874, Governor Bennett received this petition: We the undersigned Citizens of Weiser deem it necessary to write to you in regards to the Indians in our section. They are scattered over the country in small parties and are liable to do a great deal of damage by [setting] fires and burning up all of our grass. They are more numerous now than at any time since the close of the war & [there] are Indians from diferent [sic] reservations. They winter on Cranes Creek and in the midst of our stock range. Consequently they are bound to kill our cattle & we will have to resort to some means to protect our property... [signed by 16 men, including S.W. Jefferies and Bro., Peter Saling, James Gray and Bro., Lafayette Lansdon and others] (Territorial Record Box 1, file 89).

On June 14, 1877, the Weiser area settler's worst fears seemed to materialize when non-treaty Nez Perce murdered several people on the Salmon River, then gathered for war.

Letters started to pour into Governor Brayman's Office. One written on June 18, 1877 came from Warren. "The Nez Perce Indians are on the Warpath. Their first depredation was committed on last Thursday morning. They commenced their murderous work on the Salmon River, just below where the little Salmon empties into said river." The letter was signed by Jas. W. Poe, and confirmed by N.B. Willey (Territorial Records Box 1, file 109).

The letter from Warren was carried by George Riebolt. Riebolt alerted settlers all along the way. When he reached Indian Valley Milton Kelly sent along a plea for arms and ammunition:

...The soldiers had a fight in the White Bird Canyon and lost 36 killed--Indians say they lost 13. They had driven all the stock along or near Salmon on this side of Salmon River--and it is expected they will come this way at any time & the

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soldiers can't check them for 1/4 the soldiers are killed... Indians here within the week when 7 passed by--2 from Malheur and from Fort Hall--7 unknown. Local Indians all [accounted for] and peaceable with only two out, said to be hunting... There are about 50 women & children here. About one half at Abernathy's in Middle Valley and the rest at Wm. Munday's. There are about 90 men but only 50 guns...send arms and all the ammunition that can be spared...[Solon] Hall's boy will be the carrier of this and Riebolt will be with him.

Kelly added a postscript saying, "Those Indians are blood-thirsty. They are gotten [sic] all the supplies and hardware they want and will jump on their fast horses and come here in 36 hours after they leave [the] Salmon if they come this way." (signed) Kelly. The letter was written in hasty, pencil scribbled script on a piece of butcher paper (Territorial Records Box 1, file 109).

The following letters from the Territorial Records (Box 1, file 109) provide some historical evidence to the fear and isolation felt by the settlers along the Weiser River, and gives some hints of their reactions.

We the Citizens of Ada County, Weeser [sic] and Hornet Vallies [sic] do request that immediate assistance be furnished us in the way of arms and ammunition. Our last Mail brings us the intelligence that the Indians have murdered 14 of the citizens on Salmon R. and have made threats against this portion of our Country & we know not what hour they will be upon us.

Salubria, June 19, 1877: Gov. Brayman, Sir; In view of the outbreak of Indians and the massacre of 11 white men (perhaps more) on Salmon River, I beg to offer my services...I am at present engaged in protecting the frontier around here. There are lots of women and children and they are scared to death... I leave tonight to warn the outlying camps and settlements but shall return here by morning and await events, if not killed before. Some Indians were seen today going in the direction of the Heath District which I left yesterday the 18th. Your obedient Servant, Frank J. Parker

The only woman to write the Governor's office sounds calm and not quite "scared to death."

Payetteville, I.T., June 19th, 1877: Mr. Biggerstaff wishes me to write you and ask you to send some guns and ammunition. I do not know that there is any danger but the Neighbors seem to be alarmed and there is but five firearms, we haven't any. Mr. Hunt has gone to Owyhee with [horses?]. Respectfully, Leonora Hunt.

Lower Payette, June 19, 1877: Our citizens in this section are in a bad fix to defend themselves from an invasion by the

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Indians...All the indications are of war from the present outlook, we are liable to be attacked at any time, & we most earnestly request you to forward them [arms] by return stage. We would prefer needle guns if we can get these. Very respectfully, J.F. Griffin, Peter Pence, ? M. Bevins----- (P.S.) Since writing the above I have had a talk with the Weiser Stage Driver, he reports Indian spies [sic] being seen on the upper Weiser. The Weiser Indians are on Hornet Creek, fishing. Driver says they had promised to come in but have failed to do so. The excitement is great. (signed) J.F. Griffin

Emmetteville, June 19th, 1877 (letter sent to Clay Bransletter or I. Tiner in Boise City): I think it would be a good idea to send some ammunition to Indian Valley immediately. Those people up there have some guns but no ammunition and send it over the trail by a couple of men and pack animals. I make this suggestion Clay & think it is a good one. You and Tiner see it is attended to. I meet Solon Hall's boy here and will go home with him today. Those Indians have raised h--l over there. Yours in Haste, J.B. Oldham

S.R. [Snake River], June 20th, 1877: Hon. E.J. Curtis, Dear Sir; Being in danger here of the Indians if they continue to be troublesome. I would like to have 5 guns and ammunition to protect myself with in case of trouble. My place [Munday's Ferry] is a regular thoroughfare for the renegades... (signed) Peter Munday

The "Indian Problem" threatened the Weiser settlements from the south as well as the north:

Indian Creek, I.T., June 22, 1877: Hon. M. Brayman, We met some of the representative men of the Indians who inhabit Camas Prairie [near Fairfield] last evening and sent some riders to notify Capt. Jim & Tetoba [Tendoy?] to meet us today. We have assurances that they will do so & hope to report fully and favorably to you by noon tomorrow. We have learned these Indians have been solicited to join the Northern hostiles and a portion of them are undecided as to whether they would do so or not. It is to be hoped that nothing hasty in the shape of hostile demonstrations will be made towards Winnemucca until all peaceful efforts are made to effect an understanding as to his intentions (signed) T.E. Logan, J.N. Coston

June 23, 1877, Gov. Brayman: On receipt of the news of the outbreak of the non-treaty Nez Perce Indians in North Idaho, and the probability the Indians would make for Weiser Settlements in southern Idaho... [I] proceeded to Indian Valley. [I] Found the people, some ten families gathered in at Wm. Munday's house in great consternation over the news. My first object was to learn the character of the Weiser Indians in this

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valley; about 75 in number under Eagle Eye, about half bucks [males]. They was scattered some but were soon brought in, and professed peace. They had heard the news from North Idaho but promised to a man to remain in camp and keep peace with the whites. [They] Would send some of their squaws out to dig roots, but bucks would remain in camp. Found several scatterings of Indians, some from Fort Hall, two from Malheur Agency with permit from Indian Agent to travel and hunt. One bunch of seven bucks had gone through the valley the day before I arrived. Their destination, North Idaho, they were all well armed with from 40-50 rounds of ammunition. Eagle Eye's band is pretty well armed. My opinion is that these Indians will remain peaceable unless the hostiles come over, with a few that may go the fighting ground... (signed) Milton Kelly

On June 24, 1877, a letter was sent to E.J. Curtis in the Governor's office with a map and description of the area south of the Salmon River from John G. Hughes. He wrote:

Dear Sir; When I was in Boise the Governor showed me a map that he had in his office. As you will see by looking at it, you will find a blank from the Salmon River south. I have been over the ground several times...I have made a rough draft of the country as I have it in my mind...The streams coming into the Salmon from the north are where the massacre is said to have occured. I know that the country between Slate Creek and White Bird on both sides of the river is a favorite country for the Indians as a winter home. About this time of year they travel up the Little Salmon and drop into North Payette Valley. In this valley there are each summer from one thousen [sic] to fifteen hundred Indians, consisting of Indians from the Lapwai Reservation, Salmon River, Sheepeaters from the South Salmon, the Indian Valley band under Eagle Eye, indians from Fort Hall Reservation, some Cayuses and Umatillas from Washington Territory, Joseph's band from the Wallowa Valley and a few from Malheur and Owyhee. They usually spend from one to three months in the valley, fishing, hunting, horse racing, gambling and trading. I do not think that whites trade with them there, as I have always been told by the Indians that they got their supplies of ammunition, flour, & [?] on the Weiser. I believe that in this valley--which is about fifty miles long and from twelve to fifteen miles wide, well watered, with heavily timbered mountains on both sides and fine grass all over--will be where the Indians will be met and whiped [sic]...I forgot to say that there are no wagon roads through the country I have been describing, and pack animals would be necessary. With much respect, I remain yours truly,
John G. Hughes

Governor Brayman received a letter from the Malheur Indian Agency reassuring him:

June 24, 1877: I have to inform you that my messenger who was

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sent after Chief Egan has just returned and informs me that Egan with seven lodges of his own and Weiser River Indians will be here in a few days--having crossed the Snake River in route to this place a few days ago. "Leggins," sub-chief under Winnemucca is now here and says part of his people are near Stein Mountain and the balance on Owyhee toward Three Forks. No danger need to be apprehended from any Indians belonging to this reserve. Very Respectfully, W.W. Rinehart (Agent)

Indian Valley, June 25, 1877: To His Excellency M. Brayman, Governor of Idaho, Sir; I respectfully report the following. Arrived here this afternoon with my Command: 26 men besides the [?] of transport wagon. I ascertain from reliable sources that there are hostile Indians this side of the mountains. No hostile act has as yet been committed. I think this section is closely watched by the Indians--the friendly Indians have all left the Weiser. The people of this section are much alarmed. Women and children have left this valley--a fort for protection of families is being built on the Upper Weiser... (signed) O. [Orlando] Robbins, Capt. Co. A.

As the summer months went by it became apparent the Nez Perce were moving east and not south toward the Weiser Settlements. On Aug. 30, 1877, Governor Brayman received a communication from Lt. Luther Wilmot, Mt. Idaho Volunteers. Wilmot and his group of civilians had followed the trail left by the Nez Perce near the Salmon River, and in his report he describes what they found when they located a camp site used by the Nez Perce:

...we was successful in finding a great many caches and destroyed such things as we could not use or carry away, which consisted in: 10,000 lbs. flour; 2,000 lbs. camas root; 250 lbs. sugar; 100 lbs tea; 75 camas hooks; 25 axes; 3 drawing knives; 50 grass bags; 25 brass kettles [sic]; 2 do [dough] pans; 4 saddles; 6 over coats; 6 robes, buffalo; and a great many other articles that I did not make a memorandum of. We drove over 147 head of horses... We started home with our horses and cattle [They rounded up any they found along the way] and crossed the divide between Salmon River and Camas Prairie, and down near the lakes we met Indians driving about 75 head of stock, and knowing the stock did not belong to them and that they did not have any pass, I arrested them and took them to Mt. Idaho... 6 indians was seen on the Prairie. I took 16 men and followed them for 12 miles where we lost all trace of them. (signed) Luther P. Wilmot, 1st. Lieutenant, Mt. Idaho Volunteers (Territorial Records Box 1, file 114).

After the Nez Perce were captured at Bear Paw, Montana in the fall of 1877, the Weiser settlers hoped life would quiet down, but the "Bannock War of 1878" followed, prompting another appeal by J.D. Agnew and Solon Hall for guns and ammunition. On June 17,

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1878, Agnew and Hall received ten Springfield Muskets and four hundred cartridges. June 22, 1878, Solon Hall signed for 40 additional cartridges (Territorial Records Box 1, file 99).

That summer Jake Groseclose, Tom Heady and William Munday were killed, and S.S. "Three-Fingered" Smith seriously wounded as the men hunted horses stolen from Indian Valley by renegade Indians. Troops were called to the area but the Indians were not found. Settlers stayed on guard.

Weiser Mills, June 30, 1878, to Jo. Oldham: Dear Sir, I understand that the Governor furnishes parties in the exposed Settlements ammunition on your recommendation. If so, I would be forever thankful to you to get me some ammunition for a carbine 45 caliber and also for a Territorial pistol. Should you get the ammunition please send it by Stage to the Weiser Store. I need it verry [sic] much as I am almost entirely out. Yours Truly, John Cuddy

A note penciled in at the end of Cuddy's letter reads, "Recd. July 10th. forwarding 40 carbine cartridges, and 36 pistol cartridges (signed) J.B. Oldham (Territorial Records Box 1, file 100).

The last major Indian war in the Territory was the Sheepeater Campaign of 1879, fought in the Salmon River country. Troops marched into the wilderness in the early spring, and searched the rugged mountains until deep, in last days of autumn, as snow was falling in the back country did Lt. Farrow and his Umatilla Scouts captured the Sheepeater band. Indians captured included those from the Northern Shoshoni (the Sheepeater band known as the Tukudika), Weiser, and Bannock bands.

While Lt. Farrow escorted the captives to Vancouver, Lt. Brown was ordered to return to the Umatilla Agency by way of the Crooked River country to observe the landscape and look for Indian sign. On October 7, 1879, Lt. Brown, three Umatilla scouts and three troopers started for Crooked River via the Payette Lakes and Little Salmon Meadow. The group stopped at Groseclose Ranch on Cottonwood Creek, hoping to solicit a guide. None of the civilians would accompany the group that late in the season. The march up Hornet Creek was the hardest trip of the campaign for the men. They almost perished in the cold and snow (Brown 1926:27).

Although the major wars were over, Indians were still hunted. In the spring of 1881, Jim Summers and "Rattle Snake" Jack Slade headed out on an trip Jim Summers' young friend, W.W. Lloyd remembered: They said they were prospecting but it was supposed they went looking for Indians...Summers and Jack found the camp...down in a canyon. They thought they had good shooting and began to shoot but the Indians were on alert and had a spy in the bluff above them.

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When they began shooting, the Indian began shooting. He was hidden so they could not see him but could see the smoke when he shot. He shot Summers through the shoulder. Summers said, "Jack I'm shot and will have to get under cover or we'll be killed. We have to make a run for some timber not far off. Let's go."

Jack said, "Don't go too fast for I'm too fat to run very fast. Don't run off from me."

Summers said, "Do the best you can. I'm going as fast as I can." They ran for it and made the timber with Summers bleeding badly and stayed under cover till dark. Then they made their way back to Brownlee Ferry and on to Pine Valley. During the night they came to the Henry Foster Ranch in Pine Valley. Uncle Dunham Wright happened to be there visiting Mr. Foster. Uncle Dunham told me Summers was the bloodiest man he had ever seen and badly worn out. They took his shirt off, dressed the wound which was only a flesh wound but bled badly. The wound soon healed.

Then late in the year (1881) Summers got a bunch of men together...looking for the "Sheepeater" Indians and they found them. Men coming back from a raid like that seldom talked about what they did (Lloyd 1950).

The next year "Rattle Snake" Jack Slade died. Judge Harris remembered Slade:

He was a holy terror when under the influence of liquor...One night in October, 1882, he armed himself with a big pistol and proceeded to take possession of Dal Gray's Saloon. He was terrifying everyone there to such an extent that George Porter, the Deputy Sheriff was sent for and came with a shot gun and demanded cessation of the hostilities. This only incensed Rattle Snake the more and he was about to take a shot at Porter who was too quick for him and let him have one in the breast, over the heart. This settled him and he fell to the floor and expired immediately (Harris 1940:13).

In 1887, Summers and Jim Ruth, the founder of Ruthsberg went on a prospecting trip into the Heath District. According to Judge Harris:

[They] found a ledge about two miles above the Lockwood discovery [on a tributary of the Rapid River], out of which they took some ore plainly showing its value by the free gold on the surface. The next summer they went back and dug a ton or two of the rock and packed it to Ruth's quartz mill on Brownlee, where they got all the values there were in the ledge (Harris 1940:21).

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Judge Harris continues Summers' story:

The old fellow was afflicted with cancer that had entirely destroyed his right eye. He suffered intensely, but never made mention of the disease. He wore a bandanna handkerchief over the eye to conceal the effects of the cancer.

Jim Summers died in October of 1893. Local lore glorified Jim Summers' legend by saying he fixed himself a last meal, drank a bottle of whiskey, opened the door of his cabin and died of hypothermia with his faithful old dog standing by, but Judge Harris tells a less dramatic story:

Two prospectors, James Bennell and Harry Skrow, who were crossing the mountain on the trail that led to Summers camp, found the body lying in some scrub quaking asp. He had evidently fallen over in the night. He was buried near where the body was found and the grave is still kept by Forest Rangers (Harris 1940:60).

Friends of Summers in Oregon wanted to move the body, but decided instead to erect a memorial marker for Summers in the "bachelor lot" in Pine Haven Cemetery, Oregon.

In Idaho, facing Pine Valley from Cuddy Mountain, friends of James Hazen Summers set up an engraved stone to mark his grave. Over the years the Forest Service fenced the site to keep livestock off the burial.

Judge Harris gave the Summers' story its ending when he wrote:

The early prospectors came into the hills and mountains of Washington County...with high hopes and implicit faith in the discoveries they made...Up in the higher altitudes, such as the Seven Devils, there is a grayish colored bird, known as Clark's crow in ornithology, but as camp birds locally...Some believe that they are the spirits of old prospectors who have returned from another world to see if their claims are still there...Tom Heath, Jim Ruth, Billy and Stewart Simpson, Old Scoty Atwell, Jim Summers, and probably others of the Ruthberg section have all passed on (Harris 1940:pp. 31, 29).

On August 24, 1992, almost a century after the old Kentuckian died, a new buck and rail fence was built by Payette National Forest Archaeologist Lawrence A. Kingsbury, and Wayne Hersel and Linda Strain from the Weiser District, to protect Summers' grave and headstone.

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COVER ILLUSTRATION BY NANCY BROSSMAN