

Wigginses Tell of Early Days in the Palouse Country

Published in two parts in the Pullman Herald

Friday, January 3, 1947 (Part One)

Pages 1 & 10

Newspaper Article written by Annetta Lee Sherman

Transcribed by Monica Bartlett Peters (31 March 2010)

Mr. and Mrs. Levi Wiggins, pioneers of this section who have seen the development of the Palouse country from bunch grass and cayuse farming to the present high-speed day and night tractor farming, have seen the Indian trails turn to common dirt roads and then to broad, hard-surfaced highways, and can remember the advent of the railroad into Staley and Genesee, celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary at their present home in Clarkston on December 19.

Mr. and Mrs. Wiggins spent the day greeting old friends and reminiscing on early-day happenings in the Palouse country. They recall that Pullman was first known as Three Forks and that one of its first large celebrations was held about where the city playground is now located. They have seen the surrounding towns spring up, and know how many of them received their names. According to the Wigginses, Staley once had a thriving dry goods store and had all the earmarks of becoming a flourishing city. Granite Point, now known as Chambers, supported a post office and store, and was quite a center for the neighborhood. Johnson received its name from Johnny Johnson who owned the present town site. At its heyday, Johnson boasted a hotel, two general mercantile stores, a blacksmith shop, a butcher shop, two grocery stores, a hardware store, two livery stables, a doctor, a dentist, barber shop and saloon. Later a school, two churches and a bank developed. The only thing that has withstood the wear and tear of time is a string of grain warehouses and elevators.

Colton, Mr. and Mrs. Wiggins remember, grew up out of a quarrel between two men who seceded from Uniontown. In the early days, Colton included two general mercantile stores, two lodge halls, one hotel, a hardware store, an implement store, a doctor, a dentist, two banks, two livery stables, a post office, a blacksmith shop, a church and five saloons.

At about this time, Leitchville, another small community which was located at the present site of the Paul Druffel farm, better known as the "Sisters' Place", pulled up stakes and joined the town of Colton. Leitchville, named after Mike Leitch, was in the early 1870's a stage depot and a rendezvous for escape from the Indians. Here was located a fort, rifle pits and all the equipment necessary for protection against Indian uprising. Colton also had a stockade for protection from the Indians.

Mr. Wiggins has seen many changes and helped with many developments in the Palouse country. In 1884, he helped haul the lumber from Moscow that built the True Hotel, Pullman's first hotel which was located at about the present location of the Washington. [Ed. Note: The Washington Hotel was located on the corner of Main and Pine.] In the early 1880's, Mr. Wiggins and his brother, Eli, went to Walla Walla where they waited a week for machinery which was to be Moscow's first flour mill, known as the Moore mill. This machinery was freighted up the Columbia River from Portland, and then hauled to Moscow by the Wiggins brothers. Spokane at this time was still known as Spokane Falls, and Mrs. Wiggins as a small girl, visited friends there and helped herd the family cows in the mist formed by the falls.

Mr. and Mrs. Wiggins have watched the State College at Pullman grow from an uninhabited hillside covered with bunch grass to the present beautiful campus where their children and grandchildren have received or are now receiving their higher educations. They have seen the bunch grass, the wild horses and prairie chickens disappear and wheat fields take their place.

They saw the Northern Pacific Railroad come in as far as Staley in 1887, and move on into Genesee in 1888, which was at that time the main line from Spokane to Genesee.

Flax Used as ‘Starter’ When Pioneers Broke Ground Here

Friday, January 10, 1947 (Part Two)

Page 10

When asked about the early farming, Mr. Wiggins related: “We broke up the native bunch grass and usually seeded flax for a starter. It seems that flax did very well while the ground was new. In the early days we cut our crops with the header and stacked the heading grain in long stacks. After this operation, we came in with our stationary threshers powered with horses; used the derrick table and forked the headed grain from the stacks to the derrick table; then hoed-downs pulled the grain to the thresher. In those days we really put in the hours, starting at 3 a.m. and running to 9 p.m. Breakfast was at 6 a.m., dinner at 12 noon, and supper at 6 p.m. Usually we fed at the ranch houses.

All the neighbors pitched in and helped each other and everyone was neighborly and helpful. Of course, there was transient help usually called “Hobos”. And say, there were some mighty good poker players in those days, too!

“We had lots of hardships and ups and downs on the farm but enjoyed life. The wet fall of 1893 got most of us in a bad way financially. We borrowed money at about 18 per cent, and it took forever to pay off the mortgages with low-price wheat. We were all in the same boat—no one had anything. We worked hard, and didn’t know what cars, electric lights, telephones and the like were then. We carried water from the well or spring, went to the mountains for our wood, took our wheat to the mill and had it ground into flour. Hogs and cattle were cheap and we cured our own meat, canned our own food, buried potatoes and apples for over the winter. We made our own laws and tried to rid the country of crooks. A man’s word in the early days was really good for what he said.

“Yes, Lewiston, Idaho was always a good open town. We hauled our oats to Lewiston. There was a lively market there for our grain to feed the pack train that supplied the miners in Pierce County. It was not unusual to see 126 head of mules and horses packed and ready to carry all kinds of equipment and food to the mines in the Pierce County area. Yes, Lewiston was quite the place. Lots of transient people were there. Wine, women and song was the story. The Snake and Columbia rivers were used in the early days to freight tons of supplies from Portland, Oregon, to Lewiston, with stops all along the way. Wawawai was a large grain-shipping post at one time. All of us in this part of the country hauled there. Sometimes wheat wagons waited all day to be unloaded.

We farmed with Cayuse horses and thought a horse that weighed 1200 pounds was large enough for our use. We captured some of the wild horses and tried to break them, but most of them broke their necks before being tamed down. If you did get one of those ‘bang tails’ under control, they were tougher than a pine knot.

Uncle Sam has a great nation here. I have lived through four wars and think that I'll enlist in the Marines when the next fight comes—so as to avoid the draft.” When asked about his good health: “Live rightly, obey the laws of nature, keep active. It is better to wear out than to rust out.”

Mrs. Wiggins said, when asked about her part in the pioneer days, “We women cooked, sewed, and looked after the gardens and stock in busy seasons. And, of course, helped with the sick. Babies came along quite regularly and doctors were hard to get. When a doctor was needed, someone had to make a Paul Revere ride for him on horseback. Many times he made a thirty to forty-mile trip. Home remedies were always used and we got pretty good at setting bones, taking care of the contagious diseases, etc. In those days, many people died of what was then called acute indigestion. Perhaps an appendectomy is what they needed.

Our social life consisted of spelling bees and what we called literary society. We also had those ‘kitchen sweats’, now called dances.

“We had good times and enjoyed ourselves. People had time to visit with each other and be interested in each other’s welfare.

“We tried to live up to the Golden Rule; live and let live. Where there is love there is no need.”

Levi Wiggins was born April 27, 1859, in Guthrie County, Iowa. He crossed the plains with his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Ben Wiggins, by ox team in 1863, coming west to the Willamette Valley in the fall of that year. When he was 19 years of age he came to the Palouse country with his father, mother, brothers and sisters, and at the age of 21, took up a pre-emption on land near Colton, later exercising his homestead right adjoining the pre-emption. On this property he established his first residence—a dugout in the hillside; and after a year or so, he built a lean-to shack in which he lived until he moved it to the present site of the farm buildings.

Mrs. Jennie Black Wiggins (Sarah Jane Black) was born on October 5, 1868, at Moores Valley, Yamhill County, Oregon, after her parents, Sarah M. and William C. Black, had crossed the plains by ox team in 1865. At five years of age, she moved with her family to a farm near Gaston where the father passed away. The following fall the mother moved her family of nine children to a small farm near Carleton, Ore., and four years later, March, 1880, they moved to a location between Dayton and Marengo, Wash. In April, 1881, they moved to land near Belmont which the mother homesteaded.

In 1882 Miss Black met Levi Wiggins at a party at the home of her aunt, Sarah Seat, who lived on Union Flat. Four years later, on December 19, 1886, they were married at Farmington in a double ceremony with Mr. and Mrs. Price Black, and the two couples celebrated their 50th, 55th and 57th anniversaries together.

Born to Mr. and Mrs. Wiggins were eight children, four boys and four girls. Three sons and two daughters are living: Mrs. Grayce Wood, Mrs. Mildred Lane, and Roy Wiggins, Pullman; L. G. Wiggins of Altadena, Calif., and L. O., Wiggins of Seahurst, Wash.

Mr. and Mrs. Wiggins moved in 1920 from their farm home to Pullman, residing here for five years. From Pullman they moved to Johnson and then to Clarkston where they are now living at 1129 Eighth Street.

More than 125 friends from all over the area called at the Wiggins home on their anniversary Thursday to extend congratulations, and in addition the couple received many greeting cards, flowers and gifts.

On Sunday, December 22, about fifty relatives of Mr. and Mrs. Wiggins gathered at the Lewis and Clark Hotel in Lewiston for a family dinner in honor of the anniversary. Those attending were: Mr. and Mrs. Ike Dunlap of Orofino, Mr. and Mrs. Elmer Wiggins and Mr. and Mrs. Lee Haddon of Asotin, Mr. and Mrs. L. C. Hatley of Colton, Fred Maynard and Elizabeth Block of Clarkston, Mr. and Mrs. Fred Richard and Mr. and Mrs. James Hubbard and Billie Click of Lewiston, Gailord Wiggins of Altadena, Calif., L. B. Mix of Homedale, Idaho, Mr. and Mrs. Orlan Case and Darla Rae of Deer lake, Mrs. James Harkness, Diane and Jimmie of Tacoma, Mr. and Mrs. Rick Ricker of Metaline Falls, Mr. and Mrs. Adolph Howe of Seattle, Mr. and Mrs. Lowell Wiggins of Seahurst, Wash., Mr. and Mrs. Lester Wood of Lewiston, Mr. and Mrs. Theodore Schaaf of Napa, Calif., Oscar Black of Santa, Idaho, Mr. and Mrs. Angus Campbell of Copper Mt., Canada, Mrs. Ellen Black of Portland, Mr. and Mrs. Carl Johnson and Dean of Almota, Mr. and Mrs. Allen Watt, Mrs. Mildred Lane, Mrs. Grayce Wood, Miss Dorris Aigner, Lee Wiggins, Duane Wiggins, and Roy Wiggins, all of Pullman.

[Ed. Note: J. Levi Wiggins died in 1955 and S. Jennie (Sarah Jane) died in 1950. Both are buried in the Pullman City Cemetery. Following is a record of the Wiggins' children buried in the Colton City cemetery: Valentine died 15 Feb 1892 at age 1 day; Edith died 22 Aug 1890 at age 2 years, 6 months, 22 days; George Raymond died 11 Feb 1909 at age 1 year, 9 months, 14 days; LeeRoy (Roy) died in 1970 at age 75 years. Grayce A. Wiggins Wood died in Clarkston in 1974. Levi's brother, Nathan Eli Wiggins, died in 1937 and is buried in Pullman City Cemetery.]



Couple on left: Levi and Jennie (Sarah Jane) Black Wiggins. Couple on right: E. Price and Lizzie Maynard Black. These couples were married in a double wedding ceremony on 17 Dec 1886 at the Whitman house in Farmington. This picture was taken about 1936 when the couples celebrated their 50th wedding anniversaries. (Picture courtesy of Whitman County Historical Society)