

Robert Newell

Readers should feel free to use information from the website, however credit must be given to this site and to the author of the individual articles.

by Justin Trammell

Robert Newell was born near Zanesville, Ohio on March 30, 1807. Although Newell himself kept a journal about his experience as a mountain man and early pioneer, very little is known about his childhood.¹ One historian maintains that Newell was apprenticed to a saddle maker until he was eighteen when his father passed away. It was then that Newell answered adventure's call, joining a fur trapping expedition headed for the Rockies.²

There amidst the snow-covered peaks and frigid fresh water streams, Robert Newell earned the nickname "Doc," which would stick with him for the rest of his life. "Doc" Newell had no professional medical training. However, it is safe to say that in the mountains, a "doctor" was anyone brave enough to take a look at frostbitten feet, arrow wounds and a myriad of other ailments so prevalent in mountain life. Robert Newell was brave enough and thus came by his nickname for his success superintending minor surgical operations and his, "knowledge of simple remedies for afflictions of man and beast."³ As was the case for much of Newell's life, experience was the best teacher.

It is clear, from Newell's journals, that his formal education was minimal, given the number of grammatical errors. However, compared with the stereotypical "mountain man," Newell was more "man" than "mountain". According to Marion County settler, Francois Matthieu, an exile from the 1837 Canadian revolt, Newell was, "head and shoulders above the other mountain men in his knowledge of government, and...of the methods to be employed in organizing a government; in fact, he was something of a statesman."⁴ Throughout his career both as a trapper and politician, Newell was often called upon to ease tensions between "whites" and Native Americans.

Not only did Newell stand out among his fellow mountain men with regards to his education, he was also above his peers in terms of social etiquette. It is important to understand that mountain men were not viewed with much higher regard than Native Americans or "savages," as they were often called during the 1800s. Jason Lee, the famed Methodist missionary in the Willamette Valley once remarked in a letter to Congress that he feared for the future of the Oregon Country if it should continue to attract, "the renegade of civilization from the Rocky Mountains."⁵ Newell, however, was often described as jolly, kindhearted and a good storyteller; and there are no legends or tails of cruelty, or heroism for that matter, attached to his name. "Though fond of mirth and jollity and the life of social reunions, he never degenerated from the behavior and instincts of a gentleman."⁶ Robert Newell was not a saint, however, he seems to be "as close as it gets" in mountain man circles. Newell joined his first fur-trapping expedition. March 7, 1828:

I left St Louis with Mr Wm Sublette who was the proprietor of our Camp on a hunting expediton for beever 55 men in all arrived at the foot of the mountains on Sweet water the 17th of July where we met his hunters or a part and crossed the mountain from the waters of the Missourie to the Columbia and on piers fork we fell in with Messers Smith & Jackson partners of Mr Subletts august 20th held Randevvous and Separated for Beever hunting when all together about 175 men.⁷

Newell was 21 when he signed on with the Sublette brothers to trap fur. He spent the next ten years moving back and forth across the mountains and plains with his friend, Joe Meek, trapping for the Sublettes (William, Milton & Andrew) Davey Jackson, Jed Smith, Tom "Brokenhand" Fitzpatrick, Alex

Drips, Lucien Fontenelle, William and Charles Bent and Ceran St. Vrain.⁸ As one might imagine, Newell's job was full of adventure, especially considering the fact that he was often asked to step in and negotiate with the "Indians" during disputes. One such incident was dictated to his friend, Peter Burnett, and later recorded by Burnett, of which there are two accounts if you add Newell's journal. Newell confirms this incident saying, "As the crows had committed So many depradations on the whites heretofore by Killing and robings it was their intention to Send me with them a small Supply of goods to induce them to let the whites pass in peace."⁹ According to Burnette, Newell journeyed to the Crow camp where one of the chiefs reported a list of grievances against the whites and demanded payment from the company. Newell knew the company could not pay the sum and had to think quickly to defuse the situation. In his, "slow, hesitating manner," Newell explained to the chiefs that he was sent,

As the mere agent of the Company and was not authorized to enter into any stipulation for payment to either party, that he did not come to count over the wrongs committed in the past, that both parties had done wrong often, and it was difficult to say which party had been oftenest or most to blame, that he came to bury the past and stipulate for peace in the future, and wished to know of them whether they would mutually agree to be friends for the time to come. This was the best possible ground to be taken and so pleased the assembled chiefs that they entered into a treaty of peace.¹⁰

This experience made Robert Newell the "go to" man with regard to Native American relations on the frontier. Although Newell may have been the best candidate for communicating with the Native Americans, he also engaged quite frequently in fighting them and even referred to the fighting, on one occasion, as "sport."¹¹ This is most likely a product of societal conditioning as Native Americans were considered to be "savages" and the concept of "Manifest Destiny" that was so prevalent during the 1800s. It seems that when peace was possible, Newell pursued it. On the other hand, when there was a fight, Newell pursued it. This paradox of values was "par for the course" in the mountains. Both sides, Newell included, collected scalps of fallen enemies and yet many mountain men married Native American women. Newell himself took a wife from among the Nez Perce, probably in 1833. In his diary, Newell refers to her as, "My woman," never mentioning her as his wife.¹² Perhaps this is due to the fact that there was not an official marriage ceremony. Interestingly, once a man married an Indian woman, they would be hard pressed to return to society as they were often called, "squaw men" and rejected by "civilized" societies.¹³ For this reason, these "renegades of society" turned to the unsettled Western frontier.

In March 1838, Newell lamented, "Times is getting hard all over this part of the country beever Scarce and low all peltries are on the decline."¹⁴ With the departure of the American fur companies in 1839-1840, Robert Newell and Joe Meek decided to move west to settle in the Willamette Valley, but first they had to acquire wagons. To meet this need, Newell struck a deal with a group of missionaries to guide them over the mountains to Fort Hall. Once at the fort, Newell purchased their wagons, trading one for a hired hand, and set off for the Willamette Valley. Together with his lifelong friend Joe Meek (9men, 3 women and children),¹⁵ Newell helped blaze the first wagon trail to Oregon through the Intermountain West (The company brought the wagons all the way to the Columbia where the wagons were left until the following year when Newell floated his wagon into the Willamette Valley in 1841).¹⁶ The trip was treacherous and difficult. At times, Newell expressed regret at even having attempted such a journey. In the end, he proudly remarked in his journal, "This is to be remembered that I Robert Newell was the first who brought wagons across the rocky mountains."¹⁷ Although he made it to the Willamette Valley safe and sound on December 15, 1840,¹⁸ the valley, at that time, was little more than a wilderness.

There was no information center at which to inquire as to the best place to lodge. There were no hotels and no restaurants where they could obtain a hot meal. After traveling all day in the rain and mud with only dried salmon to eat and no place to stay except the usual camp, the hungry, dirty, tired trappers must have been discouraged as they busied themselves setting up a camp.¹⁹

Newell himself said in his diary, "This country is not So good as Supposed as the climate is not So healthy."²⁰ Anyone who has experienced a cold rainy December in the Willamette Valley knows exactly what Robert Newell was talking about!

In their camp at the Willamette Falls Newell and Meek were joined by their old mountain friends Dougherty, Wilkins and Ebberts.²¹ Of these men,

Newell had the advantage...in several particulars. He had rather more book-knowledge, more business experience, and also more means. With these advantages he became a sort of "Booshway," (the leader of a trapping party) among his old comrades, who consented to follow his lead in the important movements about to be made, and settle in the Tualatin Plains should he decide to do so.²²

Newell made his first home on the Tualatin Plains, near what is today Hillsboro. He also lived in Oregon City before acquiring land in Champoeg in 1844.²³ Newell was a natural leader, but in 1840 there was no official government to oversee the Oregon territory. The first mention of Robert Newell in Oregon's political history was made in March 1843, when his name appeared on the roster of the second "Wolf Meeting." Wolf Meetings were committees set up by the pioneers to combat the loss of livestock to marauding wild animals, and to discuss formation of an American style government.²⁴

From this mention on, Newell's name is almost synonymous with Oregon politics. For example, he was present at the Champoeg meeting which gathered to vote in favor of organizing an American style of government. At that time, Newell was selected as a member of the legislative committee on May 2, 1843.²⁵ The committee consisted of nine men who were charged with establishing a temporary set of laws, "until such a time as the United States of America extend their jurisdiction."²⁶ This legislative committee, with little formal education and minimal political experience, spent six days drafting the laws that were eventually adopted by the people in mass meeting on July 5, 1843.²⁷

It is important to note that most of the information regarding the early stages of Oregon politics is found in the paper war between W.H. Gray, originally a non-clerical worker for the Whitman mission,²⁸ and Robert Newell. Gray and Newell were both present at the second Wolf Meeting and served in the provisional government for years. Gray later wrote a series of articles attacking Newell in the +Astoria Marine Gazette+. Gray accused Newell of being unpatriotic and sympathetic to the British cause (because of his dealings with the Hudson's Bay Company). It is clear, when reading Newell's responses to Gray's attacks, that he did have a respect for the HBC, which had offered him credit when he first arrived in the valley. Newell had enough character to acknowledge the kindness of Dr. John McLoughlin, the company's chief factor. It should also be noted that Newell received very little help from the Methodist missionaries (Jason Lee), whom Gray supported, and therefore had no reason to be partial to them over the Company that had helped him survive his first year in Oregon. However, it does not seem to be the case that Newell ever put the HBC over his allegiance to the United States of America. Newell even went so far as to point out that Gray, himself, motioned for Oregon to establish a government separate from that of the United States.²⁹ We can be thankful that these two went after each other in print as it preserved much information about Oregon's early governmental history.

In an article for the Oregon Herald on December 5, 1866, Newell maintained, "The first session of the Legislature in Oregon was held in the spring of 1843 at the old Methodist mission about 8 miles below Salem in an unoccupied house belonging to that denomination."³⁰ Newell served as one of two returning legislators in the provisional government of 1844 and in the newly formed House of Representatives in 1845.³¹ In fact, Newell was elected Speaker in 1845 and 1847, which was his last year in the Legislature.³²

In addition to his work in the legislature, Newell also invested his time and money in other ways. In 1844, he was a founding member of the Falls Association or Oregon Lyceum and contributed to the

development of the Oregon Printing Association, which labored to bring news, via a printing press, to Oregonians.³³ Furthermore, Newell also purchased a 640-acre farm near Champoeg and two keel boats, the "Mogul" and the "Ben Franklin" which he advertised in the +Spectator+ on April 30, 1846:

The subscriber begs leave to inform the public that he has well caulk'd gumm'd and greas'd the light draft and fast running boats, Mogul and Ben Franklin, now in port for freight or charter, which will ply regularly between Oregon City and Champoeg during the present season.

Passage gratis by paying 50 cents specie or \$1. On the stores. Former rules will be observed, passengers can board with the captain by finding their own provisions.

N. B. punctuality to the hour of departure is earnestly requested. As time waits for no man the boats will do the same.³⁴

Newell was referred to as "Captain Newell" while he was in the shipping business, adding yet another title to his name!³⁵ On November 29, 1847, Robert Newell took a new title following the massacre of Dr. and Mrs. Whitman and eleven others at the Waiilatpu mission: peace maker.

Understandably, following the massacre, Newell was asked to go to Walla Walla to meet with the tribes there and prevent them from joining forces with the Cayuse Indians who were gearing for war. The situation was tense and the provisional legislature sent Joe Meek with a letter to Washington, begging for help from the national government. Newell records in his journal that the murderers were eager to fight, but many of the tribes did not want war with the United States.³⁶ On March 2, 1848, Robert Newell inspected the site of the Whitman Massacre and wrote in his journal, "The remains looked horrible."³⁷ It was rumored that the Nez Perce would join forces with the Cayuse. However, he was able to meet with the Nez Perce and broker a peace deal. In fact, the Nez Perce then went to the Cayuse and encouraged the innocent to separate themselves from the guilty.³⁸ The group buried the remains of the Whitman party and headed back towards Oregon City while a volunteer force pursued the murderers who were losing their warriors day by day and were unable to join forces with neighboring tribes. For his efforts following the Whitman Massacre, Robert Newell is to be commended. His good reputation with the Indian tribes allowed him and his companions to prevent what could have been a major Indian war in the Pacific Northwest. As a result of his experience in negotiating with Indian tribes, both as a fur trapper and peace commissioner following the Whitman massacre, Newell was appointed as Indian Agent within the new territorial government in May of 1849.³⁹ As if Robert Newell's life wasn't interesting enough, 1849 would lead him down another adventurous road.

Like so many before him, Robert Newell was caught up in the California Gold Rush. However, not much is known about his experience as a miner as he didn't record any details in his journals. Suffice it to say, Newell didn't strike enough gold to warrant his staying in California. According to the United States Census of 1850, he was back in Oregon with his family.⁴⁰ He did, however, make enough money to start a general store, which he opened in Champoeg in 1851. He was also elected postmaster at Champoeg that same year after failing to be elected to the House of Representatives in 1850.⁴¹

Starting in 1851, a controversy developed regarding the location of Oregon's capital. The Democratic Party was split into two camps: those who wanted the capital to remain in Oregon City and those who wanted the capital to move to Salem. Newell offered to donate land for the capitol from his claim in Champoeg. Although Newell was a democrat, he supported what was identified at the time as a "Whig" position, most likely due to the fact that Champoeg was closer to Oregon City than Salem and he would benefit financially should the capital remain in Oregon City.⁴² Suffice it to say he received a great deal of criticism from his fellow democrats for opposing the Salem movement.

The shifting of Oregon's capital from Oregon City to Salem eventually led to a diminished government role for Newell. He performed his duties as postmaster and tended to his general store until 1855 when, prompted by the outbreak of the Yakama Indian uprising he organized a group of fifty scouts (including some of his old trapping friends). The company was recognized by the United States with Newell as the commander and they patrolled the area west of Walla Walla.⁴³ After his war service, Newell again tried his hand in the political arena as chairman of the Marion County Democratic Convention in 1858 (he also became the first grand master of the Champoeg Masonic Lodge in the same year), and a member of the new Oregon State Legislature in 1860.⁴⁴ At this point in his life, Robert Newell was an accomplished businessman and legislator. However, all that was about to change.

In 1861, the Willamette rose to unprecedented levels, wiping out houses, farms and warehouses. The +Statesman+ reported, "Persons saved from trees, rafts and buildings," and "Water flowing through Salem three feet deep."⁴⁵ The flood destroyed most of Champoeg, except for Robert Newell's house, which overlooked the disaster below. Newell opened his house as a refuge for displaced families and nearly bankrupted himself in the relief effort. In the aftermath of the flood, he began to spend more time at Lapwai, Idaho, where his first wife's people, the Nez Perce, were forced onto a reservation which was based on a treaty that Congress had not ratified.⁴⁶ Newell knew that if the Nez Perce were backed further into a corner both by the government and the miners who settled illegally on Nez Perce lands, an Indian war of unprecedented proportions could erupt in the Northwest.

Robert Newell was well known for his favorable dealings with Indians and he continued to cement his relationship with the Nez Perce by honestly listening to their claims and grievances. When Idaho became a territory in 1863, testament was paid to Newell's work with the Indians when the Nez Perce refused to sign a treaty until the United States government honored Robert Newell's claim to a piece of land given to him by the Nez Perce in 1861.⁴⁷ This tribute was rare if not unheard of when it came to relationships between Whites and Native Americans. Newell continued to lobby for his reappointment as Indian Agent in Idaho, but to no avail. However, in 1868, he traveled to Washington D.C. with some of the Indian chiefs to discuss the recent treaty and make an appeal in person regarding the open position of Indian Agent. For the most part, Newell's journal is devoted mostly to his health and the weather in Washington. However, he does make some interesting comments regarding his experience with the Indian chiefs. He remarked, "People stare at the Indians," and also commented that very little attention was paid to them at the Department of Indian Affairs.⁴⁸ Throughout the course of his stay in the capital, he became increasingly frustrated with the government for keeping him, and the Indian chiefs, on the back burner. Eventually, after almost four months of waiting, Newell was appointed Indian Agent in Idaho.

Robert Newell's life as a pioneer, legislator, entrepreneur and negotiator is well documented; however, little mention is given to his family in his own writings. What we know of Newell's family, outside of several brief references in his journals, comes from census reports and newspaper articles. Newell's first wife was the daughter of a Nez Perce chief and she bore him five sons. She died in 1846. Later that same year, he married Rebecca Newman, with whom he had eleven more children: eight boys and three girls. She passed away in 1867.⁴⁹ Finally, he married his third wife, Jane M. Ward, in July of 1869. Four months later, November 14, 1869, Robert Newell died of a heart attack at the age of sixty-two.⁵⁰

Three months before Newell's death, President Grant relieved him of his duties as Indian Agent. Grant was soon to give control of the Indian agencies to Christian missionary groups. The Indians sent a petition to Grant, which stated that Newell had been their friend for over forty years and was the agent of their choice.⁵¹ Although their petition was denied, it remains a powerful testament to the character of a man who took the time to listen to a people who had been judged by misunderstood actions while their words went unheard.

Edward Abbey once said, "May your trails be crooked, winding, lonesome, dangerous, leading to the most amazing view. May your mountains rise into and above the clouds." Robert Newell's life led him down many crooked, lonesome and dangerous trails. However, he helped bring Oregon and Marion County out of the clouds and left us, "the most amazing view."

Bibliography

Delamarter, George Guy. *The Career of Robert Newell: Oregon Pioneer*. Champoeg, OR: Newell House Museum, 2005

Bancroft, Hubert Howe. *History of Oregon*, Vol. 1. San Francisco: 1888

Johansen, Dorothy. *Robert Newell's Memoranda: Travels in the Territory of Missouri; Travle to the Kayuse War; together with A Report on the Indians of the Columbia River*. Champoeg, OR: Champoeg Press, 1959

Newell, Robert. *Robert Newell's Memoranda: Travels in the Territory of Missouri; Travle to the Kayuse War; together with A Report on the Indians of the Columbia River*. Champoeg, OR: Champoeg Press, 1959

Burnett, Peter H. *Recollections And Opinions of An Old Pioneer*. New York, NY: D. Appleton and Company, 1880

Dobbs, Caroline C. *Men of Champoeg: A Record of the Lives of the Pioneers Who Founded the Oregon Government*. Portland, OR. Metropolitan Press, 1932

Victor, Frances Fuller. *River of the West*. Hartford, Conn.: Columbia Book Co., 1870

Newell, Robert. *Newell-W.H. Gray Letters (1866-1867)*. MSS 1197, Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland, OR.

¹ George Guy Delamarter, +The Career of Robert Newell: Oregon Pioneer+, (Champoeg, OR: Newell House Museum, 2005), 1.

² Hubert Howe Bancroft, +History of Oregon+, Vol. 1. (San Francisco: 1888), 244.

³ Dorothy Johansen, Introduction to +Robert Newell's Memoranda: Travels in the Territory of Missouri; Travle to the Kayuse War; together with A Report on the Indians of the Columbia River+. (Champoeg, OR: Champoeg Press, 1959) p. 9.

⁴ Quoted in Johansen, Introduction to +Robert Newell's Memoranda: Travels in the Territory of Missouri; Travle to the Kayuse War; together with A Report on the Indians of the Columbia River+. (Champoeg, OR: Champoeg Press, 1959) p. 9.

⁵ Cornelius J. Brosnan quoted in Johansen, p. 3.

⁶ Jesse Applegate quoted in Johansen, p. 11.

⁷ Robert Newell, +Robert Newell's Memoranda: Travels in the Territory of Missouri; Travle to the Kayuse War; together with A Report on the Indians of the Columbia River+. (Champoeg, OR: Champoeg Press, 1959) 31. Hereafter referred to as +Memoranda+.

⁸ Johansen, Introduction to +Memoranda+, p.9.

⁹ Robert Newell, +Memoranda+, p. 34.

¹⁰ Peter H. Burnett, +Recollections And Opinions of An Old Pioneer+. (New York, NY: D. Appleton and Company, 1880) p. 164.

¹¹ Robert Newell quoted in George Guy Delamarter, p. 7.

¹² Delamarter, +The Career of Robert Newell: Oregon Pioneer+, pp. 6-7.

¹³ Johansen, Introduction to +Memoranda+, p. 6.

- ¹⁴ Robert Newell, +Memoranda+, p. 36.
- ¹⁵ +Ibid+., p. 39.
- ¹⁶ Caroline C. Dobbs. +Men of Champoeg: A Record of the Lives of the Pioneers Who Founded the Oregon Government+. (Portland, OR. Metropolitan Press, 1932) p.150.
- ¹⁷ Robert Newell, +Memoranda+, p. 39.
- ¹⁸ +Ibid.+ , p. 39.
- ¹⁹ Delamarter, +The Career of Robert Newell: Oregon Pioneer+, p. 22.
- ²⁰ Robert Newell, +Memoranda+, p. 39.
- ²¹ +Ibid.+ , p. 23.
- ²² Frances Fuller Victor, +River of the West +(Hartford, Conn.: Columbia Book Co., 1870), pp. 285-286.
- ²³ Dobbs, +Men of Champoeg+, p. 151.
- ²⁴ Delamarter, +The Career of Robert Newell: Oregon Pioneer+, pp. 26-27.
- ²⁵ +Ibid.+ , p. 35.
- ²⁶ +Oregon Archives+ quoted in Delamarter, p. 49.
- ²⁷ Dobbs, +Men of Champoeg+, p. 152; Delamarter, +The Career of Robert Newell+, p. 45.
- ²⁸ George Guy Delamarter, +The Career of Robert Newell+, p. 27.
- ²⁹ Robert Newell, +Newell-W.H. Gray Letters (1866-1867),+ MSS 1197, Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland, OR.
- ³⁰ Robert Newell, +Newell-W.H. Gray Letters (1866-1867)+ MSS 1197.
- ³¹ George Guy Delamarter, +The Career of Robert Newell+, p. 51, 54.
- ³² Dorothy Johansen, Introduction to +Memoranda+, p. 85.
- ³³ George Guy Delamarter, +The Career of Robert Newell+, p. 55; Johansen, Introduction to +Memoranda+, p. 83.
- ³⁴ Quoted in Delamarter, p. 59.
- ³⁵ George Guy Delamarter, +The Career of Robert Newell+, p. 62.
- ³⁶ Robert Newell, +Memoranda+, pp. 108-109.
- ³⁷ +Ibid.+ , 110.
- ³⁸ +Ibid.+ , 112.
- ³⁹ George Guy Delamarter, +The Career of Robert Newell+, p. 96.
- ⁴⁰ Cited in Delamarter, p. 99.
- ⁴¹ George Guy Delamarter, +The Career of Robert Newell+, p. 104.
- ⁴² +Ibid.+ , p. 104-106
- ⁴³ +Ibid.+ , p. 113.
- ⁴⁴ +Ibid.+ , p. 113-115.
- ⁴⁵ Cited in Delamarter, p. 121.
- ⁴⁶ Johansen, Introduction to +Memoranda+, p. 91.
- ⁴⁷ Johansen, Introduction to +Memoranda+, p. 91; Delamarter, +The Career of Robert Newell+, p. 127.
- ⁴⁸ Robert Newell, +Newell Diary 1868,+ MSS 1197, Oregon Historical Society, Portland.
- ⁴⁹ Johansen, Introduction to +Memoranda+, p. 82; Delamarter, p. 128.
- ⁵⁰ Delamarter, p. 133.
- ⁵¹ +Ibid+., p. 133.