

The Camas Prairie

A rich past and an uncertain future

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An image, like this sun-bleached cow skull on a water trough, is for some an analogy of the prairie along the stretch of Highway 20. But the Camas Prairie is as full of history as that skull, but one must overlook the parched façade.

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John Henry steps fully onto the head of the shovel, digging deeper into the hardened earth. He vigorously rocks the handle back and forth. The ground holds firm. He approaches from the other side, securing a beachhead and then again rocking to loosen the ground's hold. Finally, the earth yields, and he raises a large mound of dirt, grass and root. He sifts through it carefully. In the heart of the mound he finds his prize: the camas bulb. It is of creamy white color and about the size of a large radish. John Henry holds it gently, almost reverently. Across this southern corner of the Camas Prairie, encircling May's still wet center of the Centennial Marsh, several dozen Indians of the Sho-Ban Tribe begin drumming, signaling the start of homecoming festivities that are held each spring. Rooted in tribal tradition, they echo the same ritual and wrestle the prairie to collect their bounty while embracing the camas of today.

The camas bulb has a special significance to the Indian people and the prairie's history. For centuries, the Bannock migrated to the prairie from the southern plains each summer to harvest and hunt. The camas and yumpa plants were staples in the Indian diet. The prairie, rich in camas, yumpa, grains and game, was a paradise. In 1878, Chief Buffalo Horn led the Bannock to war against the newly-arrived homesteaders because of the camas.

The Indians were outraged that the newcomers and their livestock were destroying the bulbs. "Those pigs eating the camas was what began the Bannock War," says Carolyn Boyer Smith of the Shoshone-Bannock Culture Resources Department. Ultimately, the Indians were relocated to Fort Hall, duped out of their lands by a spelling error in the 1868

Fort Bridger Treaty. "In the treaty, 'Kamas' was spelled 'Kansas,' thereby illegally excluding the Bannock people from an agreed-upon reservation site in the Camas area," explains Smith.



The camas bloom and harvest is more limited now, mostly centered in and around the Centennial Marsh. But the prairie still evokes the spirit of earlier days. For much of the past century, it has been suspended in time. It humbly but proudly displays testaments to its past. Homesteader cabins, old schoolhouses, sheep corrals, and grain elevators punctuate its wide-open spaces. Upon closer inspection, we can find Indian petroglyphs in Hill City's rock outcroppings, vestiges of the Oregon Short railroad line that serviced the area, and traces of Goodale's Cutoff, a detour off the Oregon Trail.

Looking forward, the Camas Prairie as the Indians knew it, and as we have known it, is an endangered place. In the 1800s, it was the homesteaders that rolled into the area. Today, it is expanding populations of Boise and the Wood River Valley that are driving change. The prairie will be developed. The question is when and how.

A Unique Prairie Paradise

The Camas Prairie is situated about 20 miles southwest of the Wood River Valley. Like the Stanley Basin and Silver Creek, it is our neighbor. Perhaps more than we recognize, our neighbors are vital to us. We share geography, resources and heritage. We affect and define each other. The vast openness of the Camas separates us from Boise's sprawl, making us a remote "destination resort." The camas' rich pioneering and mining history is integrally entwined with that of the Wood River Valley, and is more palpable because time has not yet erased its traces.

Yet the prairie is a neighbor that many Valley residents do not know well. Its trails and fishing holes are not mentioned in most of our recreational guides. Few have skied Soldier Mountain's back bowls. Most Wood River residents know the Camas by the view out their windows as they speed to Boise. Highway 20, from the blinking light to Mountain Home, runs directly through it. It is a scenic drive—cathartic in the way fast roads through wide spaces can be. Yet, with a little detouring, and a greater appreciation for the area, it can also be a very rooting journey.



From Left to Right: John Henry cups a camas bulb he recently liberated from the earth in the Centennial Marsh. At 90, Lena Rice is a testament to the fortitude of the people of the Camas Prairie. David Hanks, mayor of Fairfield, president of **High Country Fusion**, is the county's largest private employer.

The Camas Prairie is a high-desert plateau with an average elevation of 5,000 feet. It extends approximately 50 miles east to west and 12.5 miles across. Its more than 350,000 acres are fairly flat. The annual rainfall is less than half that of the mountains to its north, 15.7 inches, and most of that falls as snow. Yet, water has been more plentiful than it appears. A vast underground aquifer, fed by mountain runoff, provided a natural artesian watering system to the first farms. Nine creeks channel the drainage. Seven of these creeks flow out of the mountains from the north, and two additional creeks run from the south into the central Camas Creek and Magic Reservoir. This broad green prairie snuggles up cozily to the southern protrusion of the mighty Sawtooths, the Soldier Mountain Range. On the map, it is the verdant "moustache" that sits above the Snake River. As the Indians and settlers came upon it, lush with grasses and camas, and populated by antelope, grouse, sage hens, prairie chickens and waterfowl, they came upon a veritable Eden.

A Rich & Colorful Heritage

The history unfolds in waves of discovery. So abundant and accessible was the prairie that it attracted early hunters and gatherers from far reaches of the country. According to one local student of Camas history, tools made of basalt and materials specific to the area have been found as far off as Florida. The Indians enjoyed the solace of their summer campground for years before the influx of trappers, immigrants, miners, stockmen, farmers, and lumberjacks. Hudson Bay Company trappers camped in the area en route to pursuing beaver in the Big Wood and Little Wood rivers. In 1862, Tim Goodale opened a detour off the Oregon Trail. His route traveled directly through the prairie: westward along the foothills of Soldier Mountain, down through the distinctive "signage" of the Castle Rock and rejoining the main trail at Rattlesnake Junction, just east of what today is Mountain Home. Highway 20 roughly parallels Goodale's Trail, and vestiges of his original road can be seen along Baseline Road.

Settling the prairie started in the later 1800s. Cabins sprouted along the immigrant trail, and the first stock ranches took advantage of the creeks. New irrigation methods and the Homestead Act encouraged the influx. Crops included hay, wheat, alfalfa, oats, barley, potatoes, and apples. The lower prairie, in and around Bennett Mountain, fast became the most prodigious sheep-ranching region in the U.S. A San Francisco newspaper advertised the area: "The Camas Prairie is the largest body of tillable land in Idaho and is settling up quite fast. Its only drawback is the snow in the winter . . . With good land, plenty of timber, the best of water, good grass, an abundance of fish and plenty of game of all kinds, it is the farmer's home, the stockman's delight and the hunter's paradise."



Mining and lumbering drew more people to the region. The Camas Prairie became a thoroughfare for prospectors into the Soldier, Smoky, and Pioneer mountains. Stagecoach stops serviced the traffic. Porter's Inn was a legendary stop. The orchard at Porter's is still visible along the south side of the highway at Tollgate. Lumber presented another boon. The Sawtooths were rich in pine, fir and spruce. By the early 1900s, there were four sawmills in the area.

By the early 1900s, the prairie reached a pinnacle. Generous census reports for the area put the population at 4,900. Of the four small towns on the larger prairie—Soldier, Corral, Manard, Taft—Soldier was the commercial center. Throughout the prairie, there were 27 schoolhouses. Because of harsh winters, early residents built more schools to facilitate access to education. The Jackson School, near Mountain Home, is one of the most noticeable remaining schoolhouse structures.

In 1912, Union Pacific built a spur rail line into the prairie to service the sheep ranching and lumber industries. For political reasons, the railroad was situated two miles south of the town center. Most of Soldier moved to be on the railroad. Civic buildings and homes were rolled on logs down snow-covered roads. At its new site, the town was renamed "Fairfield." Hill City, at the terminus of the spur line, became another significant townsite.

By the mid-1900s, the tide had turned. The mining and, subsequently, the lumber industries, ceased operations. In 1985, the Oregon Short Line to Hill City shut down. The larger farmers bought out the smaller farmers. With fewer available jobs, the population on the prairie declined to approximately 1,000. Of the several towns along the Highway 20 corridor, only Fairfield remained. Camas County became a one-town county.

The closest other prairie towns, Pine and Featherville in Elmore County's lower prairie, had fast filled out as resort retreats, largely for Mountain Home and Boise residents. In many respects, the prairie entered a hiatus, suspended in time. Despite its robust farming industry, the area has seen no growth since the mid 1900s. On the positive side, the hiatus has been a steward for preservation. It is why the prairie has remained a wide-open space and a museum of pioneering history

A Questionable Future

Lena Rice came to the prairie in the early 1900s. Her parents operated Jones and Mosier General Store. She attended freshman year high school at the local two-room schoolhouse in Hill City. Her son, a fourth-generation farmer, now runs a family alfalfa operation. Rice co-authored a book on the history of the prairie with Nan Reedy and now chairs "The Caboose," a tourist and visitor information center in Fairfield. At 90, Rice is a testament to the fortitude of the early settlers. She projects vitality. Her eyes are bright, her gait strong and her memory sharp. Her perspective on the prairie is telling: "The area is changing. It used to be that we knew everyone. Nowadays, we don't."

Rice's observation highlights an underlying shift that is barely visible to those of us that just pass through. Although the absolute population of the prairie has changed little over the past 50 years, its composition has evolved. The "prairie pedigree"—families with generations of history on the Camas—still reigns strong, but there is a significant population of

newcomers and part-timers. Retirees, second homeowners, and Wood River residents seeking solace have migrated into the area. According to city officials, more than 50 percent of the prairie land has been purchased by “outsiders.” As a result, there has been tremendous speculation and posturing among locals, county and city officials and developers about “the Camas land rush.”

David Hanks is the mayor of Fairfield. He moved to the area from Salt Lake City in 1994. Hanks is also president of **High Country Fusion**. His company supplies industrial, mining and municipal piping systems throughout the U.S. and the world. They have just completed a large installation at a copper smelter in Indonesia. With 45 employees, he is the county’s largest private employer.

Hanks is a small man with a big presence. He projects focused intent and a commitment to do well by his adopted hometown. As he sees it, a primary challenge is to revive the economy, yet maintain the integrity of the area. Growth and development would ideally be centered in and around the current towns, leaving the agricultural landscape intact. Economic boosts could come in the form of Soldier Mountain’s expansion, and/or a new airport. His vision calls for a revitalization of downtown Fairfield—with a youth center, restaurants for locals and visitors, and a movie theatre. His greatest concern is that the economy of the Camas Prairie is not self-sustaining and the area will become a bedroom community for the Wood River Valley. The concern is real. By his estimates, half of Fairfield’s residents now commute to work in the Wood River Valley.

County officials and long-time residents alike recognize that it is a matter of time before real growth sweeps the prairie. County and city officials have been working to prepare for the future. Yet, their effort to plan is fraught with challenges. Officials must balance economic, community, conservation and a range of strong individual interests—not an easy task for a place that has been sparsely populated and retains the unfettered spirit of the pioneering West. The intent has been to center development around the townsites, Fairfield in particular, and to protect the prairie’s agricultural tradition. Many residents and officials feel that the current zoning ordinances and long-range plan do not provide sufficient direction and controls.



Judging by the queue of proposed projects, efforts to encourage development in and around existing townsites are not yet taking hold. Fairfield’s Planning and Zoning (P&Z) commissioners instituted a moratorium on new building permits

for 18 months. Once the moratorium expired, applications for new subdivisions poured into Camas County's P&Z office. Proposals ranged in size from four to 50 homesites. Most of these new developments are in outlying areas, and not in Fairfield's city limits. As might be expected, much of the early development has encroached from the east, from the Wood River area. Two significant subdivisions are just off Highway 20, east of Fairfield: Spring Creek Ranch has more than 500 homesites and Camas Creek Phase I development has another 50. Critics are concerned that this early growth in scattered corners of the prairie will set a stage for sprawl. Another small development of four homes has been proposed, bordering the Centennial Marsh. In the case of the marsh project, opponents, including Idaho Fish and Game, worry that vital habitat and historical areas will be violated.

Preserve the Camas Prairie is a 50-member organization that formed in approximately 2004 in opposition to the proposed Moonstone Ranch site for the airport. Its charter has since expanded. "It is our goal to preserve the quality of the environment and watchdog land use issues," says Bob Rodman, one of the group's three directors. Preserve the Camas acknowledges that growth is needed and inevitable. The organization's primary concern is that the current plan will not effectively manage the growth. Even a local developer concedes: "I am afraid we are going to build a prairie ghetto."

Another potentially significant factor will be the timing and nature of a Soldier Mountain Ski Area expansion and any associated airport. The relocation of the Hailey airport remains an open issue; the FAA is conducting a three-year reevaluation of all proposed sites. Whether or not the Camas Prairie is the chosen site for a new Hailey airport, the developers behind Soldier are keen to build an airport locally.

What happens to the prairie will impact the Wood River Valley. The prairie is a unique gateway into the Valley. Scenically and practically, it would be a tremendously different experience to drive 80 miles of subdivisions along Highway 20, rather than 80 miles of open prairie en route to Boise. The important historic, scenic and wildlife sites in the prairie are integrally linked to our own heritage and ecosystems. If Wood River Valley residents allow these to be carelessly unearthed, the whole region stands to lose important resources and legacy. If neighboring counties don't encourage proactive planning, the prairie could become a massive development. Alternatively, if the prairie becomes a vibrant area—balancing its beauty, agricultural tradition and history with smart growth and expanded recreational access, it could be a wonderful complement to the Wood River Valley. All would enjoy amber waves of grain on the prairie and purple mountains' majesty. Wood River residents are, in large part, the force that is driving change and therefore should actively and responsibly participate in shaping that direction, say the area's advocates.

The Prairie's Foundation

It is dusk on the day of the harvest. A firepit in the Fairfield community fairgrounds roasts the camas bulbs as the Shoshone and Bannock have done for centuries. When it is time, John Henry, together with his fellow tribesmen and the local town leaders, carefully open the hot pit and offer tastes of the roasted bulbs to the crowd that has gathered. They look like potatoes, and for the unfamiliar, they taste like a potato overcooked and in need of salt.

The drumming begins. Led by Sho-Ban elders, tribal dancers parade around the ring to celebrate the harvest. Feathers, bells and beadwork adorn heads, dress, and shoes. Local residents, farmers and visitors from Boise and Wood River, watch, clap, chant and join in the dance. These homecoming festivities are rooted in tribal tradition, but embrace the Camas Prairie of today. Hopefully, the Camas of tomorrow will so gracefully bridge the present with the past that the bounty of the prairie will be there for centuries to come.

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