

FREEWATER FOUNDED

The establishment of Freewater is credited to a group of men, in 1889, who dissatisfied with the way things were going in Milton, decided to start a sister town.

The late H. H. HANSON, Touchet farmer, was one of the “dozen-odd” people who met shortly before the turn of the century to name Freewater.

“I went to Milton in 1889”, said Hanson in an interview shortly before his death, “. . . as depot agent for the Northern Pacific railroad, and by that time ‘Freewater’ had had its start.”

A man named Mahana – “a visionary sort of man who wanted to do big things” – had laid out a town site north of the depot when Hanson arrived.

New Walla Walla Tried

“Mahana had his troubles,” said Hanson. “First, he decided to call the town ‘New Walla Walla’, but the folks living in the established town of Milton – backed by the Milton Eagle newspaper made such fun of the name that he changed it to ‘Wallaette’.”

Hanson said the “fun-poking” didn’t end. The “Eagle” wrote poems about the name rhyming like – Wallaette – he’ll get there yet.

“Mahana forged ahead anyway”, said Hanson, “and decided to establish a grain mill in the new town. He wanted people to invest in the enterprise – sort of subsidize it”, he said, “so it wasn’t long before they named Mahana’s horse “Subsidy.”

Mahana continued to sell lots in the town and he advertised the advantages of the location widely.

“The people were still jangling quite a bit about the name Wallaette,” said Hanson “. . . so Mahana decided to change the name again.”

Idea Clicked

“A meeting was scheduled and about a dozen of us attended,” said Hanson.

“We pointed out to Mahana that one of his main advertising attractions was ‘Free Water For All Home Sites’ so we suggested the name ‘Freewater’ for the town and he accepted.”

“Some of the men who attended the meeting were the Evans brothers, Burton, and Bill Kuhns, who later built the town hall. That’s about all I can remember,” said Hanson, “. . . but to my knowledge, I am the only living member of that group that met that afternoon.”

Since the wrangling about the name still continued, Mahana established his own newspaper – called the Freewater Herald – and hired a Mr. McComas from La Grande to run it.

“The Milton Eagle and the Freewater Herald really battled,” said Hanson, “but most of it seemed in fun. Milton would call Freewater ‘Jerkwater’ and accused the residents of ‘lack of civilization’ since they had just come in from the East, and the Herald would refer to Milton as ‘that place up in the Gulch’,” said Hanson.

While Freewater was organized in 1889, it was not incorporated until 1902.

The Eagle Mill was started by William B. Johnston, Stewart, Peabody and Mahana, and was run by water power, probably the last in Oregon to be so operated. When the Peabody Mill in Milton burned in 1910, the Eagle Mill was taken over by Peabody management; and is still in operation today, as Harris Milling Company.

Early History of the Milton-Freewater Area

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