

JOHN RITTER STORY

Walla Walla Bulletin, Washington, **Sunday May 10, 1953**, an Article titled *John Ritter Parlayed Watch to Forty-acre Ranch.* When I talked to the Walla Walla Bulletin, they referred me to Penrose Library.

MILTON-FREEWATER—How he parlayed a \$4 watch into his present 40-acre ranch in the rich Walla Walla River Valley is probably one of the most interesting of the many facets that have gone into the life of John Ritter, who drove a wagon team west in 1897.

Ritter was twenty-two and was working his own 80-acre farm in Kansas when overnight he decided to “throw in” with a wagon train going west.

“It was as good a time as any he recalled thinking back to his total “assets” at the time – a thin dime, his team and blankets.

Born in Indiana June 13, 1875, Ritter had moved to Norcater, Kansas in 1885 with his parents. It was from here that he started the westward trek as far as The Dalles with stopovers at Boise and Milton-Freewater.

After seeing more of the West including Western Oregon and Washington, Ritter returned to Milton-Freewater to make his home.

Emigrants West-Bound

When a party of West-bound emigrants stopped overnight at this parents home, the young Ritter came over from his own farm to visit and to listen wide-eared to the plans of the group to go to the Oregon Country. Early the following morning he was on hand as the party started, but was not encouraged to go along.

But he followed anyway and, as it turned out, his team was of great value en route. There were many streams where Ritter’s horses were needed to pull the other conveyances through.

The Journey proceeded without too much difficulty, although there was much belt-tightening as the trip progressed. By the time the 25 people in the party reached Boise, Idaho the group was down to a sack of flour and 50 cents among them, recalled Ritter.

Halted At Boise

“So, when we reached Boise, we called a halt and stopped there for about a month, in order to work so we could get the wrinkles out of our bellies,” said Ritter.

While some worked in the mines, then going full blast: at the time, some of the party worked on a big ditch project then underway in Boise, drawing the sum of \$1.25 a day. Others, including himself, washed dishes in restaurants for the princely salary of \$1 per day.

While others of the original party went on to Milton-Freewater and the Dalles, Ritter stayed on at

Boise a bit longer in order to build up more of a “grubstake” for himself. But that fall he gathered up his team and gear and followed to the Walla Walla Valley.

Here he stayed but a few days continuing on to The Dalles where he went to work in a big logging camp of about 300 men. The snow that winter lay four and six feet deep and the camp was isolated from civilization for much of the time.

“At least, the lawmen never got that way,” Ritter recalled, thinking back to the mornings he’d see men hanging from the trees.

Didn’t Dare Speak

“We didn’t dare say anything, else we’d likely find ourselves in the same position,” he said. “The poker games were serious business and if somebody got out of line, they usually wound up on a tree. We just went about our business and kept our mouths shut. Nor did we think about leaving camp right after one of the hangings.”

The following June, though, Ritter quit the camp and headed for the Willamette Valley, picking up some spare change by working a couple of weeks near The Dalles in the hay fields for a dollar a day.

Although he never pulled trigger on a gun in his life, Ritter had a gun pointed in his direction at least once. The incident occurred when he was en route to La Grande one day to file on a homestead he had staked out near Tollgate.

“Somebody knew where I was going and why,” Ritter declared. The shot from the forest narrowly missed the homesteader, drilling a hole in the dashboard of his wagon. Whipping up his horses Ritter made the rest of the journey, unscathed and filed his claim with the land agent in La Grande.

About the Watch

The four dollar watch transaction started when Ritter purchased his first home in Milton-Freewater.

“I traded the watch to a couple of kids who had a pair of spirited cavalry horses. Their parents did not want them to own them for fear they’d get hurt, so sanctioned the trade.”

Two months later, Ritter swapped the horses for a \$75 down payment on a two-acre place here. The balance he paid out as he could in \$5 and \$10 installments. Twelve years later he sold it for \$400 and bought 30 acres near Freewater.

This he improved, by leveling and planted to fruit, mostly peaches and prune trees.

Two or three trades and purchases came in between his present holding of 40 acres which today probably rates a \$30,000 market value.

From his wood-cutting days in the woods gang at The Dalles, Ritter has gone to several points in the Columbia River country plying that trade. That is the manner in which he paid for his first place here and it was this work which he has performed much of his life in the valley here.

“If it was all piled up in one place, the wood would amount to a real high mountain” he averred.