

The Almo Massacre

HISTORY OF THE AREA

By
Jay Ward

The town of Almo sits under the prominence of 10,500-foot Independence Peak. With a population of about 180, it's a quiet little place – headquarters for a peaceful agricultural area.

Bert Tracy, who runs the post office and general store, says nothing much happens in Almo. His father was born there—his grandfather was one of the first settlers—and it seems that's the way it is with most people who live there. The town's neither growing nor shrinking.

“If you wear out one pair of shoes you can't make enough to buy another pair so you can get away,” we were told good-naturedly towards the tail-end of a warm spring day.

It was a relaxed hour. Tracy was visiting with Rex Edwards, who'd come all the way over from Elba (about 13 miles) and Howard Brackenbury. Howard, 67, is retired but we told him he looked as if he could still do a good day's work.

“I could if they could get me to,” he laughed.

Yet, across the street from this easy-going place is a memorial plaque-grim reminder that 101 years ago, Almo was the site of one of the bloodiest pages ever written in Idaho's history.

“Almo, Idaho,” (the plaque reads) “Dedicated to the memory of those who lost their lives in a most horrible Indian massacre 1861. Three hundred immigrants west bound. Only five escaped. Erected by S & D of Idaho Pioneers 1938.

Not many people seem to know about the Almo massacre. In those days few written records were kept. The survivors have long since passed away. And survivors have long since passed away. And bound for California from Missouri, the emigrants-apparently-left no relatives in the area. Who's to tell about the massacre?

Just a few miles from Almo is the Silent City of Rocks—a desolate, phantasmagoric upthrust of huge boulders that rise up a barren slope of mountain. On some maps they're called the Massacre Rocks. It was while driving slowly up and around these rocks, towards sunset on this quiet day, that we heard the story of the Almo Massacre.

Unofficial “historian” of Almo is Mrs. Etta Taylor. Mrs. Taylor read from an old manuscript she had acquired.

The writer of the manuscript—who is unknown to Mrs. Taylor—wrote that he visited the battleground in 1875, fourteen years after the massacre, and found evidence of the conflict in the form of trenches that had been thrown up under each wagon in the circle.

The writer further says that a Mr. William E. Johnston (then of North Ogden) remembered as a youth seeing the Indians return after the battle displaying scalps attached to the bridles and manes of their ponies. In 1887 Mr. Johnston moved to Almo Creek, securing land that partially included the battlefield. In plowing, he uncovered “numerous” old guns and pistols.

Mrs. Taylor says she remembers Mr. Johnston many years ago (and she guesses he was in his 90's then) giving an account at a public gathering. It was similar to the account she read to us, and which we relate here, much shortened.

Our thanks to Mrs. Taylor for making the information available to us. It appears to be one old-timers version of what transpired.

The emigrant train, bound from Missouri, consisted of more than sixty wagons and some 300 people. They had apparently been harassed along the way by Indians but had been able to keep them at bay with their arms and ammunition. Gaining added courage with this success they took to firing at the Indians from long-range as they progressed. It is speculated that this precipitated a general uprising of the Indians who lived adjacent to the Oregon trail.

At any rate, Indians began to assemble at Indian Grove, a few miles South of Almo Creek (near the Silent City of Rocks). One report labels it the largest number of hostile Indians ever known in those parts.

After crossing the Raft River, their guide headed the emigrants south over the Sublette cut-off towards California. Three nights later they camped on Almo Creek. When they broke camp the next morning, unknown to them, they were being observed by an overwhelming band from up on Indian Grove.

The train got started. After the last wagon in line was some distance from the creek, the Indians attacked, surrounding them.

The emigrants immediately proceeded to corral their wagons, keeping the stock inside the enclosure. But they were cutoff from water.

A siege began. In relays the Indians day and night harassed the whites with arrows, guns and firebrands. They picked off those emigrants who attempted to escape or get water.

Realizing their desperate condition, they began the digging of a well inside the enclosure. Though carried on feverishly, the work was of no avail.

On the third day the emigrants turned their stock loose. Little by little their fighting force was reduced.

On the fourth night, under cover of darkness, the guide was able to make an escape, accompanied by a young woman. Crawling through sage brush, they made their way to the mountains, then to the settlement of Brigham, Utah, for a rescue party.

Later the same night, a man and two women, one of them with a nursing baby, stole from camp. They crawled for miles on their hands and knees. The mother of the child took its garments in her mouth and carried it in that manner as she crawled through the brush.

They were successful in making their escape. They reached a point on Raft River (later known as the EY Ranch) where they lived on rosebuds and roots until they were found by a rescue party from Brigham.

The rescue party continued on to the battleground of Almo Creek. They found the entire party slain and the wagons burned. The bodies of the unfortunate people were buried in the wells which they had dug.