

# William Packwood (1832-1917)

*By Gary Dielman*

William Henderson Packwood holds a unique place in Oregon history as the youngest participant of Oregon's Constitutional Convention of 1857. This mostly self-educated pioneer became one of Oregon's most versatile entrepreneurs. His occupations included soldier, Indian fighter, miner, cattle rancher, merchant, ditch and road builder, ferry owner, and public servant. He was a founding father of two Baker County mining boom towns—Auburn and Sparta. He is also the great-grandfather of Robert Packwood, former Oregon U.S. Senator from 1969 to 1995.

Packwood was born October 23, 1832, near Mount Vernon, Illinois. The family settled in Sparta for a while and then, when he was fourteen, moved to Springfield, where Packwood clerked in a store, often meeting Abraham Lincoln on his way to work.

In 1848, just before his sixteenth birthday, Packwood convinced his father and the army to allow him to enlist. In the summer of 1849, Packwood's company escorted a general and his retinue from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, to Sacramento, California. The following year, Packwood was posted to Fort Vancouver. As he sailed from San Francisco to Washington Territory, the schooner Lincoln ran aground in a storm off Coos Bay on January 3, 1852. The ship was wrecked, but all aboard made it ashore at the future site of Empire, where Packwood first set foot on Oregon soil.

After Packwood's discharge from the army in September 1853, he worked packing, mining, and cattle ranching on the Coquille River. In 1855, Packwood was commissioned as captain of a volunteer company charged with putting down a Rogue River Indian uprising in southeastern Oregon. Three tribes surrendered to his company, which escorted them to a reservation at Myrtle Point.

In 1857, Curry County sent the twenty-four-year-old Packwood as its delegate to Oregon's Constitutional Convention to draft a constitution in preparation for statehood. In later years, Packwood took pride in his work on the state seal committee, which adopted his suggestion of a sea view and an elk.

The gold rush of 1862 lured Packwood to Eastern Oregon. Arriving at Blue Canyon, he helped lay out the town of Auburn, which that summer swelled to several thousand miners—customers for Packwood's hastily built mercantile store. In September 1862, before there was a state-sanctioned court, Packwood was elected as one of three judges who condemned a murderer to hang.

Auburn briefly served as the county seat for newly-created Baker County. Packwood was appointed Baker County's first school superintendent; he then married the county's first teacher, Johanna O'Brien, and appointed a successor for her position. Their long marriage produced five children.

Between 1862 and 1874, Packwood was the main organizer of the construction of three major ditches that supplied water to placer mines in Baker County—Auburn Ditch (25 miles), Eldorado Ditch (125 miles), and Sparta Ditch (24 miles)—at a total estimated cost of a million dollars in the currency of the time. He is credited with naming the mining town of Sparta for his hometown in Illinois.

Between 1865 and 1868, Packwood and two partners organized the Oregon Road, Bridge, and Ferry Company which operated the Olds, Washoe, and Central ferries on the Snake River and a toll road up Burnt River Canyon, thus monopolizing traffic on the Oregon Trail and earning up to \$1,000 per day in tolls.

In 1870, the Packwoods moved to Baker City, the new county seat; there they built a house, and later, the Hotel Packwood, which Johanna Packwood ran. For many years, Packwood was Baker City auditor and police judge. In his seventies he served as assistant postmaster.

Packwood died September 21, 1917, the last surviving member of Oregon's Constitutional Convention. He is buried at Mt. Hope Cemetery in Baker City along with Johanna and their five children.

## Sources

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