

STATE OF OREGON INVENTORY
OF HISTORIC PROPERTIES
State Historic Preservation Office
Oregon State Parks, Salem, OR 97310

County Harney

Theme 5-b

Name
(Common) Sod House Ranch

(Historic) (same)

Address Malheur National Wildlife Refuge

Present Owner Malheur National Wildlife Refuge

Address P. O. Box 113, Burns, OR 97720

Original Use ranching

Date of Construction ca. 1880s-1890s

Place Photo Here

Physical description of property and statement of historical significance:

The 10-acre site known today as the Sod House Ranch is situated on the lower Blitzen Valley within the boundaries of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge about 35 miles south of Burns. This famous ranch was one of the sub-headquarters for the French-Glenn cattle operation that dominated eastern Oregon's livestock industry during the colorful period of cattlemen empires in the 1880's. The Sod House Ranch is one of the oldest and best preserved ranches in eastern Oregon, containing twelve of the original structures as well as fences and corrals dating from the 1880's and 1890's.

A. H. Robie was an early enterprising entrepreneur whose name occurs often in the historical literature dealing with Harney County. Robie owned a couple of sawmills northeast of Burns from which lumber was supplied to construct many early buildings including those in Fort Harney and some of the structures at Pete French's ranch. Robie was also innovative in acquiring public lands as reflected in his understanding and expertise with state and federal programs to distribute "swamp and overflow lands." With several partners he formed the Oregon and Nevada Livestock Growers Association and through the Swamp Act of 1860 managed to acquire about one-seventh of all the lands available. On September 3,

(over) continue on back if necessary

Recorded by Royal G. Jackson & Jennifer A. Lee Date 1978

From Harney County Planning Commission and Harney County Historical Society Sources Consulted: See Bibliography Notes: 4.22, 3, 50, 134, 136, 191, 192, 202, 220, 236, 240, 255, 256, 257
with comprehensive planning grant assistance from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. F

Please enclose map. Township 27 S 31 W Section 3

1877, Pete French purchased 43,360 acres from Robie and the Association. Another source believes that the acreage purchased was 42,300. This area was known as the Diamond Swamp and the price was \$1.00 per acre. Included in the Blitzen Valley portion was the tract where the Sod House Ranch was built a few years later.

At first the ranch was a temporary buckaroo camp with canvas tents, but gradually permanent structures were built. Some of these were: (1) a large barn 120 feet long and 50 feet wide for feeding livestock and milking cows, (2) an equipment shed that became a residence for the noted ranch foreman Emanuel Clark and his family, (3) a shed barn which was razed in the 1930's, (4) a windmill that became a distinctive landmark for the ranch, functioning for over 30 years, (5) a main residence built around 1890 and still standing and being used as a living quarters, (6) an office, (7) a stone cellar, (8) a two-story bunkhouse for the buckaroos, still in existence, (9) a blacksmith shop used by the CCC workers in the 1930's that burned in the 1940's, (10) a harness shed now gone, (11) a carriage shed which still remains and was converted to a garage in the 1920's, (12) and a beef wheel in good condition that was dismantled and stored at the Refuge. One of the several cottonwood trees surrounding the residence was planted in 1892 by Clark and has reached a circumference of 18 feet, 6 inches, creating much needed shade in summer months.

The first couple to live on the Sod House Ranch were Nimrod and Sarilda Comegys, who had first homesteaded in eastern Oregon at the Rocky Ford in 1886.

Several changes in ownership have occurred including the Blitzen Valley Land Co., Eastern Oregon Livestock Co., and the federal government which purchased the ranch in 1935 to be included in the Malheur Migratory Bird Refuge. During the 1930's considerable work was performed by the CCC crews on fences, buildings, corrals, and irrigation ditches. Today haying and grazing privileges on Sod House Ranch lands are leased to several permit holders. The ranch as it stands today contains many well-preserved remnants of an earlier era of the cattle industry. It is also well remembered as the ranch where Pete French stayed the night before he was killed by Ed Oliver on December 26, 1897. The Sod House Ranch was nominated for the National Register of Historic Places in 1975.

Place Photo Here

Theme 3

Name (Common) Sod House Site

(Historic) same

Address Malheur National Wildlife Refuge

Present Owner Malheur National Wildlife Refuge

Address P. O. Box 113, Burns, OR 97720

Original Use residence - overnight shelter

Date of Construction 1862 (disputed)

Physical description of property and statement of historical significance:

The only remains of the original 15-foot square structure that provided the name for a school, ranch, and lane is a low rock wall located near a spring where the headquarters for the Malheur National Refuge is situated today. The Sod House derives its historical significance from being the area's first permanent structure. It was constructed by two sets of brothers, the Stengers and Chapmans. Several sources pinpoint the date of its construction as 1862, but recent research by a local historian refutes this date (Welcome, 1976). Welcome believes that Chapman did not come into the area until 1871 and that Stenger would have been only 10 years of age in 1862.

In this period trappers were beginning to penetrate the Harney Basin to exploit the abundant fur resources and the Sod House came to be used as an overnight shelter for some of these travelers. The structure was constructed of willows and thick sod cut nearby and well represented the typical architectural style of homes built on the prairies during this era. Peter and Lewis Stenger and the Chapmans, John and Henry, built the structure during a winter trapping expedition on Malheur Lake and the Donner and Blitzen River.

(over) continue on back if necessary

Recorded by Royal G. Jackson & Jennifer A. Lee Date 1978

For Harney County Planning Commission and Harney County Historical Society Sources Consulted: See bibliography Items 1.1, 3,7,134,136,202,220,236,257 with comprehensive planning grant assistance from the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Please enclose map. Township 26 (S) 31 (E) W Section 35

Although it was used only a short period as a residence, its distinctive name has been applied to the general district, Sod House Ranch, Sod House School, and Sod House Lane. The Refuge has erected a stone bearing a plaque containing historical information. A post office was eventually established at Sod House Spring and named after the man living at the site, Mr. Springer. Springer Post Office was later moved to The Narrows in either 1889 or 1892. A man named Hembree was the first postmaster at The Narrows. Hembree had moved to The Narrows in 1891 and kept this post office for six years, when in 1897 Charles Haines became postmaster.