

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

County Harney

Theme 6-d

Name (Common) Drewsey

(Historic) "Gouge Eye"

Place Photo Here

Address in the valley of the middle fork of the Malheur River

Present Owner multiple ownership

Address _____

Original Use town site

Date of Construction 1883

Physical description of property and statement of historical significance:

An early settlement that became one of the major towns for the sparsely populated Harney County was Drewsey. Drewsey is located in the valley of the middle fork of the Malheur River and in 1883, the year of its founding, it was still part of Grant County. In that year what was to become Drewsey was established on a quarter section of land homesteaded by Abner Robbins and Elmer E. Perrington. Early records indicate, however, that Joseph Lamb was the earliest settler in the locality, coming in 1877. Robbins and Perrington started a general mercantile business in a 10- by 12-foot box-like structure and in the following years more commercial enterprises rapidly followed to serve the growing community. A post office was established in 1883, followed by a blacksmith shop, saloon, hotel and livery stable in 1884. By 1886 about 60 settlers with their families had chosen this locale 40 miles northeast of present day Burns and close to Drinkwater Pass. The opening of the Malheur Indian Reservation to settlement provided the impetus for attracting people to the general area that became a center of livestock and agricultural activity.

Like many historical events in Oregon there is not agreement about the origin of this town's name, or even whether Gouge Eye was once the official designation as many sources contend. According to most chroniclers of Oregon history, the (over) continue on back if necessary

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

Sources consulted (continue on back if necessary):
See Bibliography Notes: 5,12, 3,20,46,52,60,109,154, 178,184,204,206,220,234,248

For Harney County Planning Commission and Harney County Historical Society with comprehensive planning grant assistance from the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Please enclose map. Township 20 N 35 E W Section 36

town was once named Gouge Eye after the method of resolving disputes. Castolia Drinkwater, a long-time Drewsey resident and member of a pioneer family, stoutly maintains that the colorful appellation never was more than a nickname. Sources do agree that Robbins applied for and was granted a post office in 1883, and that postal authorities were unenthusiastic about such an official designator. The name Drewsey was chosen to compliment a rancher's daughter, Drusey Miller, according to another source. The spelling was changed to Drewsey by the U.S. Post Office and the name has been applied ever since. Another interpretation holds that Pennington, Robbin's partner, had a sweetheart named Drewsey in Maine, and that he wanted to dedicate the town in her memory. Either interpretation speaks highly of the romantic proclivities of the town's founders.

With the passage of time Drewsey could boast a physician (Dr. W. L. Mardsen), several general stores, a saloon "with a high porch, making it very easy for the buckaroos to dismount and remount, its ceiling shot full of holes when the boys in a festive mood tried out their pistols" (Brimlow, p. 164), and numerous other enterprises. Other businesses included a livery stable, several hotels (Bartlett Hotel and City Hotel), and a grist mill designed to run on water power. Over a period of time there was erected a school, city hall, barber shop, firehouse, jail, meat market, drug store, bordello, and even a church (Presbyterian) to minister to the spiritual needs of a community which took its original name from combative resolution of conflict. At one time the population reached approximately 150 persons, but by 1970 it had dwindled to about 40.

Electricity came to Drewsey during World War II when the first light bulb was turned on Christmas Eve, 1942. Original plans called for a power program subsidized by the federal government, but finally Idaho Power Co. was selected to undertake the electrification program which was an extension from Harper, Oregon.

The most notable structures left in the town today are the Odd Fellows Hall, an abandoned Catholic Church, Porter-Sitz Store, a one-room jail, a tavern, and a garage where the post office is presently located. Other structures used for residences, storage, or standing empty occupy the town. A small school continues to operate, a rodeo grounds provides entertainment and a practice place for all manner of buckaroo skills, but it is the Porter-Sitz Store that provides the central node of commercial and social activity.

The Porter-Sitz Store is a direct descendent of the original structure and the business has changed hands numerous times. It is presently owned by Castolia Drinkwater, the town's oldest resident and most respected source of local history. The store is a general merchandise business in the best tradition of its predecessor, vending an enormous range of hardware, groceries, dry goods, and other necessary items for rural life. One source termed it, "the most general store in Oregon." Another center of socialization is the tavern owned by Gary Cronin, who recently (1976) purchased the Odd Fellows Hall with plans to raze the structure in order to construct a restaurant on the site. An aging wooden bell tower about 25 feet in height with its bell in place is a reminder of an earlier period when the hand-drawn, hand-pumped fire wagon was summoned to action. The tower sets next to the Odd Fellows Hall, but no longer is used since the distinctive fire wagon was taken to Pendleton several years ago.

The town of Drewsey continues to survive and provide residents of the area with needed services, although the larger town of Burns has ascended in commercial importance. The town once known as Gouge Eye certainly retains its important place in the urban history of Harney County.