“The Road that Won an Empire”

Commemoration, Commercialization, and the Promise of Auto Tourism at the “Top o’ Blue Mountains”

OVER 30,000 PEOPLE GATHERED in tiny Meacham, Oregon, on July 3, 1923, as a slight morning breeze broke the promise of a warm day in the Blue Mountains. Located in the eastern part of the state, Meacham rarely hosted more than a few people at a time and for much of its recent past had primarily been what one observer dismissively labeled a “water-tank station” — a stopping point for travelers on their way to other destinations. The convergence of so many people in Meacham signaled a great event. Many visitors had arrived via a freshly graded and graveled roadway, swarming into surrounding campgrounds and placing great stress on the region’s limited resources. They gathered to witness the opening of a two-day celebration that brought together the particular commemorative talents of three surrounding communities. Baker City arranged a historical pageant, La Grande oversaw a dance hall and concessions, and Pendleton was called on to “furnish Indians,” a request that expected members of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR), who regularly participated in the Pendleton Round-Up, to eagerly perform in Meacham. Described as occurring at the “Top o’ Blue Mountains,” the event incorporated the simultaneous purposes of “Commemorating [the] 80th Anniversary of the coming of the First Immigrant Train to the Pacific Northwest and Dedicating

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First Lady Florence Harding (left) and President Warren G. Harding (center) are greeted by president of the Old Oregon Trail Association Walter E. Meacham (right), as their party arrives at Meacham station. After greeting visitors, the president gave his first address from the train car.

The New Oregon Trail Highway.” It also represented several separate efforts, including the organized remembrance of Oregon’s pioneer past and the embrace of the state’s future potential as a site of commercial manufacture and tourist draw. These various purposes found validation in the greatest of the day’s attractions: the scheduled participation of President Warren G. Harding and his wife First Lady Florence Harding.

The president attended the Meacham celebration as part of his extended speaking tour of the western United States en route to Alaska, a trip that ended in his untimely death in San Francisco in August. The demanding schedule of his voyage reflected the trip’s larger purpose of correcting a perceived disconnect between the president and his western constituents. Of the towns and cities that Harding visited during his travels in the West, Meacham was an anomaly for its limited population and relative isolation, requiring an audience of significant size to come from a considerable distance. Writing in a volume produced in memoriam to the president, the editor in chief of the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, James A. Wood, suggested
An estimated twenty to thirty thousand people ventured to the small burg of Meacham, Oregon, on July 3, 1923, to hear President Harding speak, placing great stress on the community’s limited resources. The crowds were drawn to Meacham by regional boosters who used the event to promote commercialism, patriotism, and empire.

that “any one of the towns visited in Alaska had much more of a permanent population than Meacham” and that “probably no such crowd was ever brought to a practically unpopulated place at any time or for any peaceful occasion in American history.” For Wood, like other commentators at the time, the contrast between the smallness of Meacham and the largeness of the crowd served as testament to the dedication and patriotism of those in the Pacific Northwest. Yet, Wood also understood Harding’s participation in the dedication of the Old Oregon Trail Highway as appropriate within the larger purpose of his trip, as the Oregon Trail had, “in the course of time, opened the way to the great territory of Alaska.”

The audience’s efforts to reach the Blue Mountains were rewarded by the presence of the Hardings and their genuine interest in the small-town affair. By all accounts, the Hardings participated heartedly in the celebration, even bypassing a planned golf outing to witness an afternoon staged battle, re-creating an Indian attack on a wagon train. The day’s activities, intended to both entertain and engage the first couple, also included the
Old Oregon Trail Pageant, a luncheon prepared by “pioneer ladies,” and a “pioneer’s [sic] fiddler orchestra.” The president contributed to the event by dedicating the silent-screen epic The Covered Wagon to the Old Oregon Trail Association (OOTA, the group most associated with the days’ events), becoming a lifetime member of that organization, and being adopted, along with the first lady, into the Cayuses of the CTUIR, an event marked by the gift to Florence Harding of a blanket manufactured by the nearby Pendleton Woolen Mills.

Through those activities, the Hardings’ visit to the Blue Mountains transposed the events of a silent film over the actual experience of original travelers along the Oregon Trail, exposed regional rifts in historical commemoration, and blurred the lines between memorialization and commercialization. The events also demonstrated a larger tension evident throughout the Pacific Northwest, as people struggled to both honor the region’s rural heritage and embrace the ideas of modernization that promised to prolong the area’s relevance into the twentieth century. For many, that tension incorporated not only fear that the pioneer legacy might be lost but also anxiety that Oregon and Washington were no longer important places within the ever-expanding United States.\(^9\) Narratives of the overland journey increasingly described those who made the original trek in heroic terms. They were depicted as great patriots and as a few brave empire builders whose sacrifices pushed the nation’s imperial ambitions
beyond a western edge at the Rocky Mountains. That narrative was reenacted throughout the July 3 celebration. Harding, through his participation in the event, inserted himself into the larger regional effort, while his own task of empire — becoming the first U.S. President to visit Alaska — added legitimacy to the narrative’s claims.

PLANS FOR THIS EVENT depended heavily on the efforts of area booster Walter E. Meacham, who began preparations even before the president’s participation was scheduled. Although not an immediate relation of the Meachams for whom the town was named, Walter claimed an inherited legacy to the Oregon Trail as a “child of pioneers,” a heritage he romanticized through his writing. Besides the OOTA-produced promotional tracts, Walter published numerous articles on the history of the Oregon Trail as well as poetry celebrating the first colonists along the route. He wrote the Old Oregon Trail Pageant and a similarly themed historical pageant staged in Baker City the prior year. Walter was an experienced regional promoter, beginning his career selling bonds for the construction of the Columbia River Highway in the mid 1910s before serving a multi-year appointment as the secretary of the Chamber of Congress in his home town of Baker City. He combined his experiences promoting roads and sentimentalizing Oregon’s pioneer past by founding the OOTA and serving as its president for five years, traveling to numerous towns along the trail, establishing local chapters of the OOTA, and advocating for official recognition of the Old Oregon Trail Highway. The Meacham celebration demonstrated the value ascribed to Walter’s efforts at both the local and state levels. Representatives from the involved communities elected Walter president of the planning committee and master of ceremonies for the two-day affair. The event also commemorated the roadway’s official designation as the Old Oregon Trail Highway in Oregon — a process during which members of the state legislature had repeatedly consulted Walter and that allowed for the grading and graveling of the route through Meacham, one of the last unimproved portions of the proposed highway in the state.

While outside commentators had dismissed Meacham as a stopping point to greater places, Walter, in a pamphlet published by the OOTA, positioned it as the final gateway along “The Road that Won an Empire.” As the last travelers of the original Oregon Trail began to pass into history, people concerned with preserving that legacy frequently connected the memory of the Oregon Trail to the United States’ later-day imperial aspirations; by extension, they positioned the establishment of the Oregon Territory as essential to eventual U.S. global
During the two-day event Walter E. Meacham played many roles — founder and president of the Old Oregon Trail Association, president of the celebration planning committee, master of ceremonies, and author of the Old Oregon Trail Pageant.

prominence. The Oregon Trail, such a conceptual positioning claimed, allowed enough U.S. settlers into the territory to thwart British control of the region, permitting the United States to continue its movement westward, eventually consuming territories in the Pacific Northwest. Meacham exalted the Oregon Trail in an earlier tract, writing about the path as:

. . . the Trail of romance, adventure, hope, faith and achievement as well as the Trail of misery, tragedy, hardship, despair and death.

But history so records that great things are accomplished only through suffering, sacrifice, devotion and death and because of these things an empire was reclaimed by the intrepid pioneer of the Old Oregon Trail and a great civilization founded along its course, the Old Oregon Trail stands by itself, apart from all others, the great Trail of Trails, the great highway of highways, beckoning the red blooded men and women of these United States to the great northwest into whose lap a generous Creator had poured with a lavish hand a wealth of scenery, resources, health and contentment.\(^5\)
Meacham’s hyperbolic accounting of the old Oregon Trail as the most important pathway in history moves beyond the idea of empire building and into the realm of divine provenance.

Variations of those sentiments appeared elsewhere in discussions of the trail’s worth. Walter’s work, however, differs from similar materials by positioning the small town of Meacham as the most noteworthy point along the trail, which he highlighted both for its history as a worn dirt path and for its transition into a paved highway. As part of the original Oregon Trail, the passage through Meacham had been “the worst piece of road on the route,” yet as an improved roadway, it was destined to be among “the best and most picturesque” portion of a national highway project connecting the coasts. For Meacham and other proponents of the region, the creation and dedication of the Old Oregon Trail Highway confirmed the importance not only of the trail itself but also of those who decided to pursue its course. The new highway memorialized the older route by representing “the hopes and ambitions, the vision and faith, the endurance and perseverance of brave men and women who dared the terrors of the long, weary way that an empire might be won for the United States of America.”
Such configuration of the area’s past elevated to self-sacrifice for the greater good of the nation the intentions of those who traveled through Meacham and on to more promising places in what would become Oregon and Washington State. It negated any aspect of self-interest or the possibility for those who survived the treacherous journey to arrive waving anything besides the flag of empire, with patriotism that could be called on to inspire subsequent generations. Materials intended to memorialize the area’s pioneer legacy idealized the past generation and placed their accomplishments above those of younger Oregonians. The Old Oregon Trail Pageant, like many other events scheduled for the two-day celebration in Meacham, perpetuated this idea that the first U.S. settlers to the Pacific Northwest undertook a courageous venture unmatched by subsequent efforts.

While the Old Oregon Trail Pageant celebrated that heritage by recreating movement from east to west, onlookers journeyed from all directions, many traveling hundreds of miles from as far away as Montana and Wyoming. Over 5,000 cars accompanied the first day’s onlookers, and the ease with which they ascended the Blue Mountains demonstrated the potential value of the new highway as well as the incredible efforts to make the road suitable for automobiles. Preparations for the celebration had begun before necessary improvements to the roadway through Meacham were finished. Less than a month before the event, members of the planning committee publicly hoped for adequate weather to dry the roadbed enough that it might be graded and graveled in time for the affair. People had been reaching Meacham via railcar for approximately four decades by then, and the local railroad companies would provide additional train service for the event. Still, the perceived importance of auto travel overshadowed that older mode of transport to the degree that the official dedication of the Old Oregon Trail Highway risked preceding the highway’s actual completion.

As the roadway that had once served the wagon trains into the West became more formalized and improvements such as gravel and pavement narrowed and standardized the actual route, Walter Meacham, through the OOTA, had worked to preserve its history through a modern act — having the name of the roadway made official through law. Founded in Baker City on February 23, 1922, the OOTA’s constitution identified its purposes as three-fold, the first being state and federal recognition of the highway as the “Old Oregon Trail” along the entire length of the passage between Independence, Missouri, and Seaside, Oregon. The organization achieved some success, with the route designated as the Old Oregon Trail Highway in both Idaho and Oregon through legislative acts. The Oregon Senate bill that officially recognized the highway, however, also made exceptions for portions of the route whose names preceded the OOTA’s efforts; for example, the Colum-
Columbia River Highway, a fully paved section of road that traced the Columbia River Gorge between The Dalles and Astoria, retained its original name. The value of naming the Old Oregon Trail Highway was related to both memorialization and future tourism. The Columbia River Highway, whose construction began a decade before the Meacham affair, already provided an important tourist draw through both the engineering feats involved in its construction and the scenic beauty of the route.

The OOTA’s desire for federal recognition of the Old Oregon Trail Highway was related to burgeoning auto tourists’ interest in accessing important historical sites, but it also built on previous commemoration efforts. During the first decade of the twentieth century, Ezra Meeker had begun efforts to both mark and memorialize the Oregon Trail and had argued for a federal highway before the great champion of empire, President Theodore Roosevelt. That work subsequently earned Meeker a place of honor within the celebration in Meacham. Such recognition demonstrated a marked change in the way boosters hoped to promote their various communities through veneration of the past. Historian David M. Wrobel describes the initial resistance of boosters to Meeker’s earliest efforts to commemorate the Oregon Trail: “There was not much common ground when the purveyors of the future met in the early-twentieth-century present with an advocate for the past, not until a later age when the heritage of places became a more salable commodity.” Meacham and his event co-planners were part of that later age.
Whereas earlier boosters had interpreted Meeker’s attempts to memorialize an area’s past as a threat to their emphasis on the future, Meacham described the potential for the work begun by Meeker and perpetuated by the OOTA as a “wonderful opportunity . . . to combine the historic, the sentimental and the commercial without detracting from either.”

While Meacham embraced Meeker’s work, he also sought to improve on it through the second stated purpose of the OOTA: “marking the route with the insignia of the Ox Team and the Prairie Schooner in enduring bronze or other metal.” The efforts of Meeker and others had led to myriad monuments along the original Oregon Trail, and the increased sentimentalization of the original U.S. pioneers to the Pacific Northwest suggested that more monuments would come. The OOTA hoped to standardize that process with a single design gracing every monument and road marker. Meacham placed so much importance on a unified marking system that he repeatedly attempted to copyright both the specific signage design and the concept behind the illustration. Meacham hoped to prevent other highway systems — even those claiming a similar pioneer legacy — from utilizing the image of either an ox-team or a covered wagon, because he saw that means of transport as “peculiarly adapted to the old Oregon Trail.”

Where the first two goals of the OOTA sought to employ various acts of commemoration to rectify the burying of the original Oregon Trail beneath an improved roadway, its third goal emphasized the need...
for proper advertisement of the road and encouraged all travelers to the western United States, including those bound for California, to utilize this route through northeastern Oregon, claiming it provided “the shortest and quickest route from the East to the Pacific Coast.” The larger importance ascribed to the roadway within the OOTA’s third objective shifted within the first two years of the group’s founding. While a promotional pamphlet from 1922 described the Old Oregon Trail Highway as the “Road to America’s Scenic Wonderland,” a similar tract published in 1924 replaced the interest in Oregon’s scenery with the description of the highway as the “Road that Won an Empire.” This change in rhetoric was part of a larger shift in regional promotion that coincided with the rise of auto tourism. It also reflected a larger conversation occurring throughout the Columbia River corridor. Residents along the waterway were debating how best to honor and preserve the area’s recent pioneer past, which many feared would disappear from popular consciousness as the original U.S. colonists of the region died. That conversation emerged continually throughout the two-day affair in Meacham and easily aligned with broader themes of nationalism present throughout the country.

The celebration at Meacham gained special recognition for its inclusion of the president, but it was not otherwise unique in content or intent — nor was it the only event of its type that Harding participated in during his tour.
of the West. His final, major public appearance occurred later that month in the recently constructed Husky Stadium at the University of Washington in Seattle before the audience of *Americanus* — a historical pageant whose patriotic themes included such scenes as George Washington at Valley Forge and Teddy Roosevelt organizing the Rough Riders for the Spanish American War. The production, like the *Old Oregon Trail Pageant* staged in Meacham, was part of a larger trend of historical pageantry that had begun in Great Britain during the late nineteenth century and worked its way west through the United States during the first decades of the twentieth. The form reached its height in the eastern United States during the Progressive Era but began to fade after World War I.

At the same time that historical pageantry was becoming passé in the East, it found new relevance in the West and Midwest, where celebrations such as that held in Meacham employed the genre as one mode of commemoration within a larger set of scheduled activities. The nationalistic revelry of *Americanus*, for example, coincided with both the Northwest Merchants Expo that brought business owners from Oregon, Washington, and Idaho to the city and Fleet Week, during which naval ships filled Seattle’s harbor. Examples of historical pageantry in the Pacific Northwest date to the late nineteenth century, contemporaneous with similar productions in the East and Midwest. Many were comparatively small affairs. A pageant occurring in 1914 in Walla Walla, Washington, approximately sixty miles northwest of Meacham, nevertheless had a level of “spectacle [that] must ever remain as incomparably the most beautiful and poetical exhibition ever given in Walla Walla,” according to a chronicler of local history.

During the 1920s, historical pageants staged throughout the western United States assumed a grander scale. A second pageant staged in Walla Walla in June 1923, less than a month before Harding’s appearance in Meacham, did not content itself with local recognition as had its predecessor and instead boasted the largest outdoor stage in the nation. In a comparable act of self-inflation, the aforementioned patriotic spectacle *Americanus* claimed a cast of 10,000, while a similarly themed production held in Seattle twenty-five years before had counted a mere 200 participants. Audiences met the expanded ambitions of these productions in kind, turning out by the thousands to witness the proposed spectacles. *Americanus*’s opening night drew 6,700 people, with that number more than doubling to 16,000 at the show’s close later in the week. In Meacham, Harding arguably brought more people to the event than would have made the trek otherwise, yet on the second day of revelry — while the president greeted crowds in Portland — more than 5,000 attended the *Old Oregon Trail Pageant*. 

*Vaughn, “The Road that Won an Empire”*
Staged over the “original trail,” the Meacham production opened with Chauncey Bishop, a member of both the Pendleton Woolen Mills’ founding family and the celebration’s planning committee, leading a train of participants from the CTUIR in full regalia and riding on horseback before the audience. Depictions of significant travels from the United States and through Meacham followed, beginning with the Wilson Price Hunt party of 1811 and concluding with a display of Concord Coaches — horse-drawn carriages that served as the major means of transportation into the western United States during the mid nineteenth century, before their displacement by railroads during the 1880s. Producers for the *Old Oregon Trail Pageant* also made allowances for people who had never actually made the once-difficult journey through the Blue Mountains but whose efforts facilitated U.S. expansion into the Pacific Northwest. An actor portraying Capt. Robert Gray appeared early in the pageant, although his most important contributions to the establishment of the Oregon territory — locating the mouth of the Columbia River in 1792, naming the river after his ship, and navigating his way through the treacherous sandbars and nearly fifteen miles upriver before returning to the Pacific — left him more than 300 miles short of the place that would become Meacham. Similarly, President Thomas Jefferson and John Jacob Astor each made appearances even though both had remained comfortably on the eastern seaboard during the early explorations of the Pacific Northwest. The two gentlemen commissioned others to make the trek west — Jefferson through the Lewis and Clark Expedition and Astor by hiring Hunt to establish a fur-trading post.

Interestingly, the *Old Oregon Trail Pageant* excluded Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, although the pair appeared as standard fare among other celebrations of U.S. expansion into the West and came significantly closer to the future location of the small town of Meacham, Oregon, than Gray, Jefferson, or Astor had. This omission may have occurred from fear that the popularity of the two would detract from the importance the show placed on the Hunt expedition. Hunt had actually passed through the place that would become Meacham, but he enjoyed a comparatively diminished place within popular renderings of Oregon history. Jealousy that the first travelers from the United States to traverse the Blue Mountains at Meacham received less attention than the Corps of Discovery (whose path took them north of the region) appeared elsewhere in the writings of Walter Meacham. Discussing the Native American wife of one of the Hunt party in relation to the attention afforded Sacajawea (a.k.a. Sacagawea), Meacham complained: “The praises of Sacajawea, the Indian woman, who accompanied Lewis and Clark on their journey across the continent are heralded in song and story while the patient little Indian woman with the Hunt expedition is unnamed
The Old Oregon Trail Pageant opened with Chauncey Bishop (left), whose family owned and operated the Pendleton Woolen Mills, and members of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) dressed in full regalia.

and unsung, while the privations she underwent were ten times greater than those of Sacajawea."

This concern that Sacajawea had become a noted historical figure while a comparable member of the Hunt party remained unnamed demonstrated a conflict occurring throughout the Pacific Northwest. Through engaging their states’ pioneer pasts to establish relevancy within the larger national narrative of the United States, boosters of Oregon and Washington also created regional competition over which sites, people, and events held the greatest historical significance. While the pageant at Meacham highlighted the Hunt expedition at the expense of Lewis and Clark, for example, the pageant held in Walla Walla that same summer recreated Lewis and Clark’s encampment near the Washington town but made no reference to Hunt. The geographic specificity of these historical renderings confirmed existing tensions yet also had financial purposes. For promoters of the Old Oregon
For the Old Oregon Trail Pageant, Walter Meacham elected to portray the William Price Hunt party — a group that traveled across the continent and through the area that would become Meacham in 1811 at the behest of John Jacob Astor — rather than the more popular Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Trail Highway and the communities along its path, any draw to Walla Walla meant a detour from the roadway and a diversion of tourist dollars.

The importance of adequately promoting an area was such that the “first Oregon booster,” Hall J. Kelly, was portrayed in the Old Oregon Trail Pageant. An early advocate of U.S. colonization of the Pacific Northwest, Kelly appeared in the show’s final sequence amid other people deemed significant to Oregon’s founding and early governance. Although Kelly’s actual efforts to establish a U.S. settlement in Oregon during the 1820s and 1830s met with limited success — and the disappointment of that failure would lead him to spend his later years embittered and seemingly deranged — his writings on Oregon inspired others to accomplish what he could not. The narrative of the Old Oregon Trail Pageant equated the ability to encourage migration with the work of establishing a territorial government; by extension, the region’s history as a campground for the 1843 wagon train was connected
to the founding of the state. The pageant’s program clarified that this first great wave of people brought “one thousand men, women, and children” to the territory and “settled forever the right of the United States to the ‘Oregon Country’,” over British claims.  

The Old Oregon Trail Pageant highlighted the importance of people entering the region from the east but failed to show them actually stopping in Meacham, or in any of the places to which they ventured further west. This differed from most other historical pageantry in which participants paused to recreate moments from the past. In Americanus, for example, George Washington is imagined at Valley Forge, the future president is seen kneeling in prayer amid “his tattered Revolutionary Army” and artificial snow. In the Old Oregon Trail Pageant, the performers remained constantly in motion, to the degree that the “Official Program” alternated between labeling the production a pageant and a parade. Newsreel footage of the event demonstrates the ease of this mistake. Beginning with Bishop and members of the CTUIR, the pageant’s participants moved before the audience without halt. The second group included many of the area’s Euro-American residents dressed in period garb and traveling either within or alongside a prairie schooner. Before that division disappeared from view, the third set appeared as U.S. Calvary on horseback. At each point, participants employed some mode of transportation, either horse, cart, or concord coach. Ultimately, the show celebrated movement over place. People depicting the earliest U.S. pioneers, complete with covered wagons, presumably traveled with the accoutrements of homebuilding, but no settling-down vignettes appeared.

This focus on movement also influenced the show’s conclusion. As a standard of the historical pageant format, most productions finished with an expression of the area’s hopes for future prosperity. Both Americanus and How the West Was Won incorporated scenes that imagined forthcoming events. Even Walter’s previous pageant in Baker City included “the modern tourist traveler, with his complete camping outfit and family.” Yet the Old Oregon Trail Pageant stopped in the mid 1880s, nearly forty years prior to the two-day celebration — an act that also diminished the importance of the railroad. Instead, the staging grounds themselves served as the clearest reference to the area’s aspirations, as the rough pathway through had been replaced by a graveled road and the promise of auto tourism. The importance of car travel to the event appears throughout the surviving photo documentation and site maps, which included little delineation between where cars could be parked and where people might engage the days’ celebrations on foot. Autos intruded on nearly every aspect of the celebration, including stopping alongside the pageant route and displacing audience members who had gathered to hear the president speak.
HARDING BEGAN HIS AFTERNOON of speeches and dedications by presenting a copy of a silent film, *The Covered Wagon*, to the OOTA. Released the same year as the Meacham celebration, the movie offered a narrative of the overland journey that many, including the president, understood as providing a great tribute to the original travelers of the Oregon Trail.\textsuperscript{53} As the first successful historical epic within the Western genre, the film drew comparisons to the work of D.W. Griffith and began a trend of “historical Westerns” that persisted through the end of the silent era.\textsuperscript{54} The film became part of the day’s ceremonies as a gift from Adolf Zucker, president of the film’s production company, the Famous Players-Laskey Corporation. The film had been kept under locked guard, first with Portland’s chief of police and later, during its transport to the Blue Mountains, with two armed soldiers, indicating its high perceived value.\textsuperscript{55} The presentation of the movie to Harding, who then gave it to Walter Meacham, echoed the earlier pageant performance, as the reels were carted to the presidential reviewing stand via an ox-drawn wagon, with the driver clad in a buckskin costume originally worn by one of the film’s stars.

Outfitting the driver in this manner further referenced a convention of historical pageantry — using clothing and other objects belonging to ancestors or notable figures from the community’s past as a way of adding a sense of historical authenticity. Rather than connecting to the history of area residents, however, the wearing of costume buckskins ascribed historical authenticity to the film itself. Although later assessments of *The Covered Wagon* describe it as a sentimentalized portrayal, reviewers at the time saw it as a truthful accounting of the history it presumed to portray. Even Harding, in his dedication, attested to “how accurately, how thoroughly, and how impressively it preserves the story of the trials and triumphs of the pioneer empire builders who blazed the trail to this western land and made a greater United States” and expressed hope that the film might be “handed down to generations which are yet to come.”\textsuperscript{56} In making these declarations, the president reaffirmed the sentiment that those who had traversed the Old Oregon Trail did so with the patriotic intentions of growing the U.S. empire, but he placed the authentic accounting of that effort within the fictional account offered by the film.

The magnitude of *The Covered Wagon* caused the president to emphasize its importance in a way that privileged the history it portrayed over the lived experiences of those who had survived the overland trek. Between his morning spent as an audience member of the *Old Oregon Trail Pageant* and the afternoon exercises that included an exaltation of Oregon pioneers, Harding spent two hours among those very people. The luncheon that succeeded the pageant included a banquet of bear meat, prepared and served by “pioneer
Participants in the Old Oregon Trail Pageant remained constantly in motion, often accompanying some mode of transport, such as this line of prairie schooners.

ladies” and that the president agreeably ate, followed by a “pioneer’s [sic] fiddler orchestra” and square dance in which both Hardings participated. Yet, in a speech entitled “Poetic Praise of the Pioneers Who Blazed the Way to Empire Following the Old Oregon Trail,” Harding lamented his inability to “more effectively visualize” the rigors of the Oregon Trail and complimented *The Covered Wagon*, rather than those with whom he had recently consumed bear, for helping him better understand what the effort had entailed.

The rest of the president’s talk proved similarly problematic. Within a speech promising “Poetic Praise of the Pioneers,” the president did surprisingly little to acknowledge the larger colonization experience. Instead, Harding focused on the legacy of a single pioneer, Dr. Marcus Whitman — known for founding a mission near present day Walla Walla — whose importance to the establishment of the Oregon Territory shifted between fact and legend. In electing to recall Whitman, Harding embroiled himself in decades of dispute. Some of that debate was based in regional competition that sought to place one noteworthy pioneer above another, thereby elevating the location associated with the individual. Had the president spoke before audiences of the pageant *How the West Was Won*, held the month before in Walla Walla, for example, he may have met less resistance to his remembrance of Whitman — a person celebrated within the show and whom the pageant’s
author had described as deserving “a place in the Scriptures as an addition to the Acts of the Apostles.” In Meacham, however, the Whitman legacy met with hostility, as many proponents of the area upheld Methodist Jason Lee, who camped in the Blue Mountains en route to the Willamette Valley, as “the first missionary” and an “empire builder.”

The unease over Whitman’s legacy extended beyond competing constructions of the pioneer period in eastern Oregon and Washington State and into discussions of the place of myth within the ideal of historical accuracy. Harding inadvertently inserted himself into the latter debate through his references to Whitman, raising the ire of Oregon Historical Society President Frederick V. Holman. In a letter to the editor published in the Sunday Oregonian following the July 3 event, Holman outlined the purpose of his organization: “to ascertain and establish the truths of history, and to discredit traditions and myths which are untrue and have no foundation in fact.” In retelling what Holman derisively described as the “Whitman myth,” Harding had transgressed against “all who believe in establishing the truth of history.”

Holman did not take issue with all accomplishments ascribed to Whitman. That Whitman was an early pioneer and, in his role as a Christian proselytizer, a purveyor of civilization was not at question. Even critics of the doctor were quick to compliment his efforts in establishing a mission. Whitman held enough historical relevance to warrant an appearance in the Old Oregon Trail Pageant, despite regional sentiments that favored others, and his untimely death left many — Meacham and Holman among them — comfortable elevating the missionary to the level of “martyr.” The debate instead centered on Whitman’s actions during a return trip east in the winter of 1842. Proponents of Whitman place him in the White House before President John Tyler and Secretary of State Daniel Webster, pleading the case for annexation of Oregon before encouraging the Great Migration of 1843 — the primary wagon train celebrated by the Old Oregon Trail Pageant. To critics of Whitman, that scenario overstated the importance of the missionary to the U.S. settlement of Oregon and perhaps never actually occurred.

Harding, in his address before fellow travelers to Meacham, not only related the event as fact but also situated himself within the story. Engaging his unique position as the current resident of the White House, the president explained how, by standing in the very room where Whitman supposedly gave testimony before Tyler and Webster, he had imagined the events that unfolded. Harding then described those events in the vivid detail of his “mind’s eye” before the 30,000 who had gathered to hear him. In his conception of Whitman, Harding saw a character clad in the trappings of the first U.S. explorers to the West, including “a course fur coat, buckskin breeches, fur leggings,
and boot moccasins, looking much the worse for wear,” with greater signs of sacrifice that left the doctor “bronzed from exposure to pitiless elements and seamed with deep lines of physical suffering.” At the same time that Harding imagined Whitman roughened by his experiences, the president also saw him as embodying “a rare combination of determination and gentleness — obviously a man of God, but no less a man among men.”

In describing Whitman as rugged, self-sacrificing, and able to maintain his civility amid great strife, Harding employed rhetoric similar to that used by Walter Meacham and others to champion the efforts of the original U.S. settlers into the Oregon Territory. He had presented before the audience an ideal pioneer. Holman, however, understood the president’s “adoption and acceptance of the Whitman myth” as negating the larger colonization effort. Harding’s reliance on a singular heroic act (particularly one understood as untrue) to exemplify all pioneer experiences, Holman argued, “discredits and belittles the patriotism and the heroism of the early Oregon pioneers.”

Harding’s effort to participate in the exaltation of the earliest U.S. settlers into the Oregon Territory instead resulted in a reprimand by one of the chief guardians of that legacy.

Harding recounted the “story mindful of the fact that its accuracy is challenged” and against the suggestion of friends who advised that he “ought not to relate it because it cannot be justified in history.” The president defended his decision to include an event of questionable historical accuracy, because, he explained, through his “intimate association with the White House,” he had “come to believe that this story, whether literally correct or not, affords the finest inspiration for the highest possible type of American patriotism and devotion.” Where Holman understood the elevation of a single actor as undermining appreciation for the larger event, Harding, having achieved his own level of personal greatness through the office of president, saw emphasizing the actions of an individual as providing a better source of inspiration than the communal effort involved in empire building. Holman used Harding’s role as chief executive against him in issuing a public scolding, arguing:

Warren G. Harding, as a private citizen, may believe in such historical myths as he chooses, and he may teach them to his family and to his friends as charming fictions. But as president of the United States, in a public historical address, he should not give his approval to discredited myths and traditions.

By this estimation, Harding did more than perpetuate a long-disproven tale by recounting the Whitman myth; he neglected the responsibilities of his office.

Later, at the unveiling of the Old Oregon Trail Monument — a large stone fixed with a bronze placard — at Emigrant Springs, approximately three miles west of Meacham, Harding offered to those pioneers present
As part of the two-day celebration, Harding dedicated a monument at Emigrant Springs that is now part of the Emigrant Springs State Heritage Area managed by the Oregon State Parks Department.

his most genuine tribute of the day. While his earlier talk made it appear that the president preferred myth and movies to the lived experiences of those around him, this oration reflected both his interactions throughout the day with those who claimed pioneer status and his capacity for candid conversation. Commenting that a woman within his immediate vicinity had brought with her “a water-bottle which came overland with the earliest pioneers,” Harding thought it “appropriate, in addition to the dedication . . . to baptize this stone in the name of the Creator and those who love and revere our common country.” In a dialogue assuming that every aspect of the overland journey served the greater purpose of empire building and that even objects surviving the trek could acquire the status of religious icons, the president also demonstrated his ability to relate to his constituents, indicating that he understood the value of their efforts and could apply them to greater purposes.

The president’s appeals to commonality also appeared in expressions of humility. The final time Harding appeared before the audience in Meacham he voiced embarrassment at being called on to speak again, as seemingly he had “already said enough.” The cause of this modesty included the presenta-
tion of a lifetime membership into the OOTA. Besides Harding, nine other persons acquired a “gold membership card” as part of the day’s ceremonies. Meeker, whose work in preserving the Oregon Trail and attempts to establish an interstate highway along the original route preceded Walter Meacham’s similar efforts by more than a decade — and garnered significantly more attention — received the third membership into the association. The first card went to Harding, presumably more for his position as President of the United States than actual work done toward the creation of the Oregon Trail Highway, while Zucker, whose company produced *The Covered Wagon*, received the second. This single act of honoring Zucker before Meeker signaled a transformation in understanding which energies best supported the cause of commemoration. Meeker had always included some manner of commercialization in his efforts — he started selling written accounts of his experiences as a homesteader and farmer well before he began his first promotional tour eastward across the continent, when he created a series of postcards documenting the journey that he sold en route — but positioned himself as uninterested in profit. He publicly advocated for the use of cinema as a means of memorialization and preservation, but his plans for films included distributing them freely to schools and other interested organizations. Conversely, *The Covered Wagon* exemplified an explicit move toward combining commemoration with commercialization.

**THE HARDINGS’ CHOICE TO REMAIN** in Meacham beyond their scheduled participation was prompted the president’s desire to witness a final reenactment, that of Native American performers descending upon a wagon train only to be defeated by the incoming cavalry. The president had articulated similar wishes prior to the day’s events, expressing “particular interest” in viewing the Native American actors in their encampment, created as an extension of the show. The “Indian Village” was a collection of teepees near the performance grounds occupied by participants in the two-day affair and was a standard feature of productions employing Native American performers by the time the president sought them out at the “Top o’ Blue Mountains.” The campgrounds appeared in association with Wild West shows, rodeos, and similar celebrations and were open to the public, offering interested viewers such as Harding access to a world seemingly out of time — one of ethnographic curiosity and one that was largely understood as vanishing. While the Indian Village at Meacham potentially served the voyeuristic desires of the event’s overwhelmingly white audience, the history of a similar encampment at the annual Round-Up in nearby Pend-
leton suggests that the formation of such camps depended on the desires of Native American participants to gather in this way. Director of the CTUIR’s Tamástslikt Cultural Institute, Roberta Conner, writing on tribal participation in the original Pendleton Round-Up of 1910, explains that:

Wounds of forced assimilation and loss of land, freedom, and rights were still fresh in 1910. But for tribal people who camped together in great numbers at Cayuse, Johnson Creek, and the July Grounds, Round-Up was a kind of blessing. It was one more celebration where they could remember a different way of life, when they camped together with neighboring tribes and relatives at various camas prairies. It was a time to remember living peaceably.  

The Pendleton Round-Up that was held the same year as the Old Oregon Trail Pageant boasted an Indian Village of at least fifty teepees. Participation in the annual event led to additional opportunities for Native American
performers who, in defiance of the “vanishing Indian” myth, were regularly employed in other celebrations throughout both Oregon and Washington, in order to “add color” to the events, and also made appearances within a few films. The Old Oregon Trail Pageant was no different. Although the “Official Program” offered little evidence of Native American participation, members of the CTUIR played several integral roles in the day’s events. Within the pageant, they performed as specific historical characters in addition to offering the opening cavalcade. While Walter Meacham had lamented that the Native American woman who accompanied the Hunt expedition had passed into the history books without a name, the process repeated in the “Cast of Characters,” where the person selected to portray her appeared in the list simply as “Umatilla Indian Woman.” For the performers portraying Chief Joseph, Chief Egan, and Chief War Eagle, not even their characters’ names made the cast list. The only hint of importance of the Native American participants occurred in the printed schedule of the day’s events, when the

![Image of Native American encampment](https://example.com/indian_encampment.jpg)

*Harding expressed particular interest in viewing the Indian encampment, a regular feature of rodeos and Wild West shows. Such encampments offered voyeristic opportunities for non-Native participants while existing as a space of cultural affirmation for Indians.*
members of the CTUIR and the president would be engaging in a “pow wow and smoking of [a] peace pipe.”

In designing the program, planners for the Meacham affair had assumed Native American participation. Poker Jim, a Walla Walla chief and chief of the Round-Up, initially declined to attend the Meacham ceremonies, however, and only consented through the convincing of his friend, Chauncey Bishop. In a letter written by Poker Jim to Bishop and reprinted in the Pendleton East Oregonian, Poker Jim outlined his reservations and issued a demand for self-representation within the event: “I have always believed in my own religion; all these buckskin customs and warbonnets and feather flags made of eagles never believe in no white man’s way. I will take along my own relics if I do go up and participate in the celebration.” Poker Jim took part as one of the prominent people in the pow wow with the president. Another participant, Cap’ Sumpkin, used his audience before Harding to voice grievances about the treatment of Native Americans by the federal government — a conversation the president deflected by referring Sumpkin to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. The ceremony concluded with the president and first lady’s adoption by the Cayuse, a process Harding appeared unclear about, asking: “So now, I am a Umatilla?” He received the response: “No . . . you are a Cayuse.” Although this interaction seemed to provide the ultimate legitimization of the region’s pioneer legacy — that those most injured by colonization might now welcome the president as their own — the demonstrations of resistance both before and during the ceremony by Poker Jim and Cap’ Sumpkin disrupted the unquestioned celebration of westward expansion.

If the pow wow participants did not offer the clear endorsement of U.S. empire sought by the event’s planners, then a component created by a burgeoning industrial empire did. As part of the ceremony, the first lady received a blanket designed and produced for the occasion by the Pendleton Woolen Mills. Based on the company’s popular Chief Joseph design, the blanket featured a white background with a large cross pattern in shades of yellow and brown and a fringed border. The tradition of “Indian trade blankets,” often worn about the body as a robe, predated the establishment of the mill in eastern Oregon, but Pendleton Woolen Mills became the premier provider of cloths during the early twentieth century through a policy of appealing to Native American tastes and preferences, beginning with members of the CTUIR. Newsreel footage described the exchange as “the history and traditions of a noble race [being] handed down in an Indian blanket.” Bestowing of this blanket upon Florence Harding offered physical evidence of her and her husband’s adoption into the Cayuse (the president similarly received gifts), symbolically making blanket Indians of the First Couple.
President Harding (center right) stands to the left of First Lady Florence Harding as he is adopted by the Cayuse — a process he seemed unclear about, asking afterward if he was a member of the Umatillas. During the ceremony, Florence Harding was presented with a blanket designed by Pendleton Woolen Mills especially for the occasion.
The exchange also increased the national profile of a local industry. The Pendleton Woolen Mills continued producing blankets with the design created for the Meacham event. Sold as the “Harding” pattern, the blanket proved quite popular in subsequent years, with garments made from the material, including the “Harding Sport Coat,” introduced by the end of the decade. Marketing for both the coat and the blanket depended on the original design’s presentation before the first lady, for while “the beauty of the robe [bespoke] its popularity,” it was “valued for its historic significance.”

Different from a souvenir or reproduction, the Harding blankets manufactured and sold by the Pendleton Woolen Mills descend directly from the first shawl conferred upon Florence Harding as part of the same line of production created for a historical event. The Hardings’ visit to Meacham, their witnessing of the Old Oregon Trail Pageant and subsequent participation in the day’s events, their interactions with Poker Jim and Cap’ Sumkin, and their eventual departure all repeat through duplicates of that first blanket. A day that sought to memorialize the recent past is itself remembered through this commercially constructed piece of cloth.

Pendleton Woolen Mills’ continued manufacture of the Harding blanket with clear reference to the celebration of July 3, 1923, attests to the sustained importance of the event in the formation of a regional identity. The early twentieth century saw the communities that contributed to the Meacham affair losing prestige to growing metropolises such as Portland, Spokane, and Seattle. In trying to reestablish their area’s importance, Walter Meacham and his fellow boosters pushed beyond asserting their cities’ significance on the state level, positioning the passage through the Blue Mountains as essential to the wellbeing of the entire United States and the nation’s ability to establish an empire abroad. The validation that Harding’s participation brought to that claim was undeterred by either the president’s untimely death later that month or the scandals marring his reputation in the decades since.

Writing in a subsequent promotional tract, Walter Meacham lamented that the president’s lifetime membership in the OOTA “terminated so tragically within thirty days” but made no reference to Harding’s supposed misdeeds; Meacham did not attempt to lessen the president’s role in the celebration in response to his increased unpopularity.

Instead, as commemorative forms such as historical pageantry diminished in relevance and the connections made between covered wagons moving through Meacham and the U.S. territorial expansion into the Pacific became less pertinent, the fact of the president’s participation overshadowed other elements of the two-day event and acquired mythical proportions.
of their own. Harding had many kind words about the communities that surrounded Meacham, the people who inhabited the area, and the region’s pioneer past, yet the greatest significance attributed to the day depended on the idea that the president described Meacham as “the capital of the United States all day long,” a statement that does not appear within the official record of the day’s speeches. Meacham’s boosters aspired to equate the area’s importance to the acquisition of Alaska and Hawaii — and certainly such rhetoric persisted for a time — but what survives within the popular memory of the event is that Meacham had a singular moment of national importance, a legacy not incongruent with the desires of Walter Meacham and other promoters of the area. Although the two-day event commemorated the U.S. colonization of the Pacific Northwest and those who undertook the task of empire, it also marked a hopeful transition away from that earlier period — evidenced through such displays of modernity as the celebration of the recently improved roadway, the potential for auto travel that it represented, and the employment of the film, *The Covered Wagon*, as a new means of memorializing the overland journey. Harding’s supposed equation of the unincorporated community of Meacham with the nation’s capital — even briefly — indicated that Meacham had achieved some level of the modernity and civility frequently equated with the urbanized East during this period and pursued by aspiring burgs in the West.

The very sense of modernity pursued by promoters of the Meacham affair ultimately led to a continued embrace of the region’s pioneer past in an effort to attract tourists. The same desire that caused the president to express “particular interest” in viewing the Indian encampment pushed subsequent generations to romanticize Oregon’s frontier heritage and to seek remnants of that period. Representations of that earlier era abound in the region. A prairie schooner led by plywood oxen greets visitors at the state park that developed around the monument at Emigrant Springs, and one of the more enduring celebrations of regional identity, the Pendleton Round-Up, references approximately the same time frame as that portrayed within the *Old Oregon Trail Pageant*. Yet, considered against the construction of area history presented by the pageant — one that embraced the idea of the forward motion of the United States and negated the continued presence of Native Americans — the annual rodeo is arguably of the present. Just as Poker Jim and Cap’ Sumpkin challenged their presumed positions as relics before the President of the United States, the Round-Up continues to offer a complex portrayal of the region’s history of colonization — one that frustrates the narrative of empire championed by Walter Meacham and his cohort.

*Vaughn, “The Road that Won an Empire”*
NOTES


5. Wood, “The Old Oregon Trail.”

6. Other commentators also saw the mass attendance in Meacham as significant, although elected more understated ways to express this. See “Oregon Spirit Grips Harding,” Morning Oregonian, July 4, 1923, p. 2.


9. In the first decades of the twentieth century, both Stephen Penrose and Eva Emery Dye, noted chroniclers and ardent champions of the U.S. colonization of the Pacific Northwest, acknowledged within public addresses that the area did not seem to hold the same sense of importance to the larger national narrative as it had in the century prior. Eva Emery Dye papers, OHS mss 1089, box 10, file 2, OHS Research Library; Stephen Penrose, “The Historical Significance of Walla Walla Valley,” OHS Mss 1041, OHS Research Library.

10. Although many people contributed to the planning and execution of the event from each of the three major eastern Oregon cities involved as well as from many of the surrounding communities, Walter Meacham took the lead in these activities and was frequently the public face of the event.

11. Walter’s parents migrated from the eastern United States to Baker City, Oregon, sometime before 1870, but have no apparent relation to brothers Alfred and Harvey Meacham for whom the town was named. Vertical file, “Meacham Family Genealogy,” OHS Research Library.

12. Chronological file of correspondence related to activities of the OOTA, in Walter Meacham Papers, AX 065, box 7, folder 7, University of Oregon Special Collections, Eugene [hereafter Meacham Papers].

13. At the time of the OOTA’s founding, only the portion of the road designated as the Columbia River Highway between Hood River and Seaside was paved. The road between Hood River and Pendleton was graveled, as was much of the route between La Grande and the Oregon/Idaho border.


15. Walter E. Meacham, Story of the Old Oregon Trail (Baker, Oregon: The Old Oregon Trail Association, 1922), 23.

16. Ibid., 19.

17. Ibid., 29.


21. Legislative bills regarding the Old Oregon Trail, in Meacham Papers, AX 065, box 7, file 8.

22. An engineer on the Columbia River Highway, Samuel Lancaster, wrote on the history and geology of the Columbia River Gorge and the construction of the Columbia River Highway in his work The Columbia: America’s Greatest Highway through the Cascade Mountains to the Sea, first published in 1915.

23. See, for example, Marguerite S. Shaffer, See America First: Tourism and Na-

24. In 1906, Meeker, who had migrated to the Pacific Northwest via ox-drawn wagon in the early 1850s, utilized this same means of transport to retrace his original journey, west to east, hoping to locate and mark the remnants of the Oregon Trail.


27. Old Oregon Trail Association, constitution, and articles of incorporation, in Meacham Papers.

28. Ibid.

29. Meacham, The Story of the Old Oregon Trail, inside cover; and Meacham, The Old Oregon Trail, inside cover.

30. Ibid.

31. Shaffer, See America First, 165.


37. Meany, Americanus, unpaged; “Columbia, The Historical Pageant” (Seattle, 1897), unpaged.


41. For example, although Americanus and How the West Was Won engage different histories, one a national narrative and the other emphasizing local events, both include Lewis and Clark's journey across the continent as important elements of their productions.

42. Meacham, Story of the Old Oregon Trail, 11. The woman who accompanied the Hunt expedition was named Marie Dorian. Meacham’s mistake may have resulted from his reliance on Washington Irving's Astoria (first published in 1836) as his primary source in recounting the Hunt expedition. Throughout this work, she is referred to only as “Dorian's wife” or his “squaw.”


44. Walter Meacham was not alone in his exaltation of Hall. A critical review of the historical pageant How the West Was
Won published in the East Oregonian similar positioned Hall as important to the U.S. colonization of the Pacific Northwest. “How the West was Won,” East Oregonian (Pendleton), June 8, 1923.

45. “Official Program: Old Oregon Trail Pageant,” unpaged. This scene also includes such notable figures in Oregon history as Dr. John McLoughlin, Stephen A. Douglas, George Abernathy, John Wittiker, and Joe Meek.


50. “President Harding at Meacham, Oregon,” Moving Image Archives, o1278 SILL, Oregon Historical Society Research Library [hereafter OHS Research Library].


52. Trail Pageant photo album, 1923, in Meacham Papers, PH 106, 1.


55. “Historical Film is Guarded by Soldiers,” Daily East Oregonian, July 2, 1923.

56. James W. Murphy, Last Speeches and Addresses of Warren G. Harding President of the United States: Delivered During the Course of His Tour From Washington, D.C., to Alaska and Return to San Francisco, June 20 to August 2, 1923 (Washington D.C., 1923), 250–51.

57. Meacham, The Old Oregon Trail, 31; “Official Program: Old Oregon Trail Pageant.”

58. Murphy, Last Speeches and Addresses of Warren G. Harding, 259.

59. Stephen B. L. Penrose, President of Whitman College, in an address at Olympia, reproduced in Edmond S. Meany, History of the State of Washington, Revised (New York: Macmillan Company, 1924), 122. Meany provides a detailed accounting of the debate over Whitman’s legacy contemporary to Harding’s speech along with his own conclusions on the matter, 122–127.


61. “President’s Reference to Whitman Myth Regretted: Romantic Story Revived by Harding in Address at Meacham Challenged by Frederick V. Holman,” Sunday Oregonian, July 8, 1923.

62. Ibid.


64. Although this was the major point of debate between Harding’s speech and Holman’s critique, other controversies surrounded the Whitman legacy, including the use of his tragic death to pursue anti-Catholic legislation within both Oregon’s territorial government and on the federal level, and as a cause to declare war upon the Cayuse tribe of Native Americans whom Whitman was assigned to convert. See for example, Clifford M. Drury, Marcus and Narcissa Whitman and the Opening of Old Oregon, vol. 2 (Seattle: Pacific Northwest National Parks and Forests Association, 1986), 375–382; Antone Minthorn, “Wars, Treaties, and the Beginning of Reservation Life,” As Days Go By, ed., Jennifer Karson (Pendleton: Tamástlik Cultural Institute, 2006), 62–65.

65. It is generally accepted that Whitman aided the 1843 wagon train; the issue is to what degree this occurred.

66. Murphy, Last Speeches and Addresses of Warren G. Harding, 253.

67. “President’s Reference to the Whitman Myth Regretted.”

68. Murphy, Last Speeches and Addresses of Warren G. Harding, 256.

69. “President’s Reference to Whitman Myth Regretted.”
70. This is now the site of the Emigrant Springs State Heritage Area owned and operated by the Oregon State Parks and Recreation Department. Literature produced at the time of the celebration alternately labeled the location “Immigrant Springs.”

71. Murphy, Last Speeches and Addresses of Warren G. Harding, 261.


73. Murphy, Last Speeches and Addresses of Warren G. Harding President, 261.

74. “President Harding Presents 'The Covered Wagon' to Pioneers at Oregon Trail Pageant at Meacham,” Sunday Oregonian.

75. Ezra Meeker, “Article of Incorporation” (New York: The Oregon Trail Memorial Association, Inc.), unpaged.


77. “Dedication of Old Oregon Trail will be Made by Harding,” Pendleton East Oregonian, June 8, 1923.


80. Wesley Andrews, “'Pendleton Round-up' from Airplane,” Wesley Andrews Post Cards, Organized Lot No. 87, box 1, folder 9, OHS Research Library.


83. Ibid.


86. Ibid.


89. “President Harding at Meacham, Oregon 1923,” Moving Images Archive 01278, OHS Research Library.


91. See Robert H. Ferrell, The Strange Deaths of President Harding (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996). Ferrell describes Harding as a relatively popular political figure before his death, but increasingly unpopular posthumously with his reputation tarnished by scandals.

92. Meacham, The Old Oregon Trail, 32.

93. On President Harding's death, James W. Murphy compiled and published his final speeches, including comments Harding made beyond the planned dialog in Last Speeches and Addresses of Warren G. Harding President of the United States: Delivered During the Course of His Tour From Washington, D.C. to Alaska and Return to San Francisco, June 20 to August 2, 1923. For the Meacham celebration this included the dedication of the silent film The Covered Wagon, Harding’s speech about Oregon’s pioneer legacy, his dedication of the monument at Emigrant Springs, and his initiation into the OOTA. In an article immediately following the event a writer for The East Oregonian described Meacham as the “capital of the United States” but did not attribute this sentiment to the president. Harding’s supposed remark appears in several places including a historical marker in Meacham and most recently in a newspaper article marking the ninetieth anniversary of the Meacham celebration. See Dick Mason, “For a day, Meacham, was ‘capital of the United States all day long,’” The Observer, July 1, 2013.