Family and Community on the Eastern Oregon Frontier

By William F. Willingham

The atypically large family (forebears of the author) of William and Perniece Carter (seated), circa 1896. The two older men in the center are (from left, standing next to their wives) Charles Davis, husband of Mr. and Mrs. Carter's daughter Mary, and Ivan Sloan, husband of daughter Maude. (Son Sam is missing.) William, wife Perniece, two-year-old Mary, and five-day-old Maude began their six-month journey from Arkansas to Oregon by wagon train on April 30, 1875. They settled in the John Day Valley for three years before taking up a homestead in Long Creek valley in 1878. (Author's coll.; OHS neg. OrHi 90724)
OVERLAND IMMIGRANTS to Oregon in the 1870s faced a situation quite different from that faced by those who arrived in the pre–Civil War period. In the earlier era agricultural opportunities in the fertile Willamette Valley served to attract most of the pioneers who braved the arduous six-month journey across the Great Plains and western mountain ranges. In the later time, while the quest for agricultural prosperity continued and the challenges of the trip remained just as daunting, the final destination had changed. Since the most fertile land of the Willamette Valley had been claimed by the 1870s, would-be homesteaders sought their future in the recently opened bunchgrass rangeland of eastern Oregon.

The higher elevation, more extreme climate, reduced rainfall, and thin volcanic soils of the land east of the Cascade Mountains makes for a relatively short growing season and limited crop options. Abundant native grassland, however, once thrived in this unique physiographic environment. In short, while the land offered late nineteenth-century immigrants excellent possibilities for open-range cattle and sheep ranching, crop-growing conditions for subsistence homesteading were problematical.

Into eastern Oregon’s challenging agricultural setting hundreds of overland immigrants poured in the 1870s. The pathway had been paved for them by miners and merchants who flocked to the John Day River and Auburn mining districts in the 1860s. While the placer-mining boom had largely played out by the early 1870s, it left behind a basic political and economic structure that served the new wave of overland immigrants seeking free land under the Homestead Act of 1862. The miners had needed civil government, roads, trade centers, and military protection. In response, the Oregon legislature created Grant, Baker, and Umatilla counties in 1864; and Gov. George L. Woods opened The Dalles Military Wagon Road in 1867. Meanwhile, merchants and miners established settlements such as Canyon City, Auburn, and Prairie City; teamsters transported supplies into these interior communities and shipped gold out.

Federal authorities did their part in the “settlement”

Oregon’s second wave of overland immigrants: What do census records tell us about their families and communities?

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of eastern Oregon by establishing military posts, such as Fort Harney and Camp Logan, to help restrain the area's Native population. The arrival of the Euro-Americans had disrupted the Indians' subsistence life-style, which depended upon the systematic, seasonal occupation and use of the same lands as the white settlers now claimed. Relations between Natives and white Americans in eastern Oregon remained strained throughout the 1870s, culminating in the Bannock War of 1878 and subsequent confinement of Indians to reservations. Finally, the General Land Office sent contract surveyors to carry out the cadastral surveys that opened the land to legal settlement. This basic infrastructure and undercurrent of conflict provided the setting for the pioneers arriving in eastern Oregon during the 1870s.1

Who were the settlers hoping to make a new life for themselves in the land east of the Cascades? What were the cultural, ethnic, and demographic characteristics of those attempting to build new communities and raise stable families? What role did women play in this process? Did the basic characteristics of the new overlanders differ from those of the pre-Civil War immigrants to Oregon? How successful were these settlers at community building? Did family structure in these communities change over time? Some answers to these questions can be found in the federal decennial (ten-year) census schedules. Census records reveal the basic demographic and social attributes that eastern Oregon settlers brought to their pioneer experience; such information then allows us also to examine the process of community building and family life over time. By comparing census data from a frontier locale with findings from similar studies of other regions in the nineteenth century, we are able to discern a context for interpreting the pioneer history of eastern Oregon homesteaders.2

This case study of the demographic and familial aspects of eastern Oregon frontier life uses the 1880 and 1900 census schedules for Long Creek valley, Oregon. Censuses for this community were chosen, as we shall see, because they permit analysis of the demographic and familial characteristics of the settlers, and of the processes of community formation and growth, during the region's final phase of frontier settlement.

LONG CREEK VALLEY, roughly six by seven miles in area, is located in northern Grant County. Grant County is a mountainous, heavily timbered region drained by several forks of the
Detail of a 1921 Oregon State Highway map showing most of Grant County (the town of Long Creek is indicated in the upper-left quadrant) and portions of the adjoining counties of Harney, Malheur, Baker, Union, Umatilla, Morrow, Wheeler, and Crook. This network of primarily nineteenth-century communities and county roads remained generally the same until construction of U.S. Highway 395 in the early 1930s. (OHS neg. OrHi 59139)

John Day River. Numerous fertile valleys lie along the streams and rivers of the county. Long Creek, a tributary of the Middle Fork of the John Day River, gives its name to the valley through which it flows and to the mountains on the valley’s southern edge. The valley encompasses elevations ranging from 3,600 to 4,200 feet. Rainfall averages ten to fifteen inches yearly, and the soil is classified as a mollisol of bedrock hills. Such land is well suited for grazing or forestry.3

Rich gold discoveries attracted the first white settlers to what became Grant County, and mining remained a significant, though declining, economic activity in the area during the last third of

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the nineteenth century. As mining slackened, other settlers were attracted by the agricultural possibilities of the region. However, distance from markets, poor transportation facilities, and difficult geography limited agricultural growth in Grant County prior to the twentieth century. The nearest railheads from Long Creek valley required either a hard, three-day journey over ninety miles of rugged terrain to reach Pendleton or a similar two-day trip to reach Heppner.4

Long Creek valley received its first permanent settlers in the 1870s and grew rapidly until 1900, when its population reached 524. Between 1880 and 1900 newcomers took up all productive land in the valley, establishing a town called Long Creek. Incorporated in 1891, Long Creek had 123 inhabitants by 1900. The valley’s population dropped slightly between 1900 and 1920, as small-scale homesteaders on marginal lands failed to make a go of it and sold out to larger, neighboring ranchers. Experience demonstrated that the soil, climate, and elevation of the valley were best suited to livestock raising, which could most efficiently be conducted in large-scale operations. Thus, while the region’s census data for 1880 reflect characteristics of immigrants and home-
steading families at the beginning of settlement, the population figures for 1900 reveal attributes of rural families and individuals at the end of an era of growth and at the onset of rural decline.  

The 1880 census for Long Creek valley provides a demographic and social profile of a small number of settlers and their families who flocked west in the post–Civil War era to occupy free farm-land under the provisions of the Homestead Act of 1862. This legislation promised 160 acres of free land, after payment of a nominal fee, to all who would reside on and improve the land for five years. Between 1875 and 1880, 25 families homesteaded in Long Creek valley, and most of these settlers came from the lower Mississippi Valley.  

The 1880 census reveals that out of 28 heads of household in Long Creek valley, only 3 were born in Oregon; the remainder had migrated from noncontiguous states. Tennessee, Arkansas, or Missouri was the birthplace of 15 (53.6 percent) of these heads of household. Figures for the valley’s entire population reinforce this finding. Of the 150 inhabitants recorded in 1880, 75 originated in Arkansas, Missouri, or Tennessee; 35 came from Oregon. At the time of the 1880 census, no foreign-born persons resided in
the valley. By comparison, on the western Oregon frontier of 1850, Arkansas, Missouri, and Tennessee accounted for only 22.3 percent of the population; foreign-born residents accounted for 3.8 percent. Between 1880 and 1900 the percentage of Long Creek heads of household born in Oregon doubled, but those born in noncontiguous states continued to make up over 60 percent of the total. By 1900 foreign-born residents amounted to 10 percent of the Long Creek heads of household.\footnote{7}

By the beginning of the twentieth century, a shift had occurred in the point of origin of household heads: Arkansas, Tennessee,
“The nearest railheads from Long Creek valley required either a hard, three-day journey over ninety miles of rugged terrain to reach Pendleton or a similar two-day trip to reach Heppner.”

and Missouri now accounted for only 18.6 percent (25); Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Iowa made up 25.1 percent (34) of the total. As one might expect, by 1900 a large share of the inhabitants of the valley gave Oregon as their birthplace. Of the 521 persons with a known birthplace, over half (286, or 54.9 percent) were born in Oregon; no other single state accounted for more than 5.5 percent of the total. Foreign-born individuals now made up 5.3 percent (27) of the valley’s population. The largest segment of this nonnative group, 11 persons, came from Switzerland.8

Agriculture accounted for most economic activity in Long Creek valley during the period under study. The census reported in 1880 that 95.1 percent (39 of 41) of those with listed occupations followed various agricultural callings, such as farmer, farm laborer, and stockman. The remainder included 1 gold miner and 1 preacher. Even with the addition of a town and its opportunities for nonfarming activities, agriculture continued to provide livelihoods for 71.2 percent (141 of 198) of those reporting occupations in 1900. Of the 19 women reporting occupations, 5 gave their livelihood as farmer, 3 as teacher, 2 as dressmaker, 1 each as nurse and milliner, and the rest as domestic.9

The census data for 1900 also provide insight into the economic conditions of the valley. The 1880s had been a period of steady growth for both the town and the surrounding countryside. The valley gained a post office in 1880, and its population increased by 255 percent between 1880 and 1890. The settlement of Long Creek counted 60 persons by the latter year and boasted such key aspects of community maturity as a school, a weekly newspaper, a Methodist church, two fraternal organizations, and numerous tradesmen and professionals. In the early 1890s the town witnessed a boom, doubling both in population and in businesses. A regional business directory for 1891–92 listed 28 business or professional persons in the town as well as a new $5,000 public school. Optimism about future prospects led the town to incorporate and to mount a campaign to secure the county seat. But then a series of disasters struck the community.10
In June 1894 a destructive cyclone swept through the valley, inflicting severe damage on the town. The storm destroyed $25,000 worth of property, killed 3 persons, and injured 6 others. The community had barely begun to rebuild when a fire consumed a saloon, a large mercantile operation, and a newly finished Masonic Hall in January 1895. In addition, the national depression that began in 1893 magnified the effects of the local disasters. Low agricultural prices discouraged farmers and stockmen alike, causing both to cut back on their purchasing; several Long Creek businesses went bankrupt. Not until 1897 did improved livestock and agricultural prices and renewed mining activity in Grant County bring prosperity back to the valley.  

Based on unemployment and homeownership statistics collected in the 1900 census, the agricultural economy of Long Creek valley had recovered from the worst effects of the depression of 1893. Of those persons listing occupations, the census taker recorded only 22.7 percent (45 of 198) as unemployed during the previous year. Their length of time without work averaged 4.6 months. Those in agricultural and nonagricultural occupations suffered unemployment in proportion to their percentage of the total work force. For example, persons engaged in farmwork made up 70.5 percent of the total unemployed, whereas those in non-
The Elk Creek placer mine (top), 1899, and the Chambers mine, ca. 1900, examples of hydraulic and hardrock mining in late 19th-century Grant Co. Environmentally devastating placer mining relied on water sprayed under high pressure to work the gold-bearing soils and gravels along stream banks. Hardrock mining in Grant and neighboring counties boomed after the arrival in Sumpter Valley of the narrow-gauge railroad in 1896. (Author's coll.; OHS negs. OrHi 90723, 90726)
farm livelihoods made up 29.5 percent. Unemployed persons in nonagricultural callings remained out of work slightly longer on average than those in agricultural pursuits: 5.3 versus 4.2 months. (Only 9 persons went without work for longer than 6 months.) Since 46.6 percent (21) of the unemployed consisted of dependent sons, daughters, or other relatives who had familial resources to fall back on, it is difficult to assess the real overall impact of unemployment on the community.

The 1900 census data on homeownership reveal that most of the 96 farms and 44 homes in the valley were owner occupied and free of mortgages. Owners lived on 86.5 percent (83) of the farms and in 46.5 percent (20) of the houses; renters inhabited the remainder of the dwellings. Long Creek valley, at 83 percent, ranked above the state (81 percent) but slightly below the county (89 percent) in the category of owner-occupied farms. All of the Oregon figures compare favorably with those for the nation as a whole, which show only 64.7 percent owner-occupied farms in 1900. Of the 103 owner-occupied residences in Long Creek valley, the census recorded debt information for 96 (79 farms and 17 houses). Only 6 (6.3 percent) of these dwelling places had mortgages: 3 (17.6 percent) of the houses and 3 (3.8 percent) of the farms.

Based on the census returns of 1900, Long Creek valley had survived the hard times of the 1890s without sinking into agricultural tenancy or heavy indebtedness. Its farms and homes were largely owner occupied and free of mortgage debt. Only 8 of 136 heads of household had suffered unemployment at any time during the previous year, and their length of unemployment averaged 5.5 months. The economy of the community had diversified over the previous twenty years with the growth of a town and its attendant business and professional services. The town functioned as a supply center for northern Grant County agriculturalists, serving a population of approximately 1,500 at the turn of the century.

Finally, the census records contain data on the community's commitment to education. An examination of this category of census information suggests that school attendance rates started at a high level at the beginning of settlement and increased over time. For example, 71.7 percent (33 of 46) of the children between ages 6 and 18 attended school during the census year 1880; by 1900, 90.2 percent of the children in this age bracket (148 of 164) received schooling. For those between the ages of 10 and 14, 78.9 percent (15 of 19) attended school in 1880 and 94.5 percent (69
of 73) in 1900. It should be noted, however, that in 1880 the census taker did not ask informants about the length of their attendance. It is doubtful that school terms in Long Creek valley (still in the initial stages of settlement) exceeded the average school term in the state, which as late as 1885 was only 3 months. The 1900 census did include information about length of attendance, and the average time reported was 4.5 months per student. The minimum school term established by law in 1901 was 4 months.\textsuperscript{13}

The census also gathered information on literacy. According to the Long Creek valley data, a high rate of literacy prevailed throughout both the juvenile and adult populations of the community. For example, 95.8 percent (113 of 118) of those 6 years and older could read and write in 1880; in 1900, 94 percent (426 of 453) met those qualifications. Literacy among males ran slightly higher than among females: 97.5 percent of males over 6 years of age measured literate in 1880 versus 92.3 percent of the females; in 1900 the figures stood at 94.4 and 93.4 percent, respectively. In the earlier census everyone over 18 years of age could read and write; in the later report 5 men and 4 women in the over-18 age

Long Creek's $5,000 schoolhouse served the community from 1891 to 1921. The cyclone of 1894 did considerable damage to the building, necessitating expensive repairs. (Author's coll.; OHS neg. OrHi 90729)
category were classified as illiterate, and those 9 persons (2 of whom were immigrants) averaged 50 years of age. Overall, the data do not indicate a significantly lower literacy rate among older persons.14

As a community newly formed through westward migration, almost 90 percent (25 of 28) of heads of household in Long Creek valley in 1880 came from noncontiguous states. If anything, though, census data such as these understate mobility, because it is impossible to determine precisely the number of moves individuals may have made through, or within, various states during their lifetimes. In a study of household heads' geographic mobility based on a representative national sample of households drawn from the censuses of 1850–1880, Rudy Seward found that the proportion of family heads of household residing in their native state, and of foreign-born family heads, increased over time. Indeed, by 1900 the pattern of mobility in Long Creek had moved in the direction projected by Seward's study. By that year 23 percent of household heads gave Oregon as their place of birth; noncontiguous states and foreign locales made up 62 and 10 percent, respectively. Contiguous states provided the birthplace of only 5 percent of Long Creek valley's inhabitants.15

At least for the Long Creek settlers, the experiences of immigration and homesteading did not disrupt the nuclear and male-dominated family structure typical of nineteenth-century Amer-
ica. Few extended families or families with unrelated persons in the household existed, and most families had a male head and both spouses present. In his national sample drawn from the 1880 census, Seward found the household head and spouse present in 85.5 percent of families; the household head alone was present in 14.4 percent. For Long Creek the percentages came to 74.1 and 25.9, respectively. Moreover, while Seward's sample reported that males headed 89.9 percent of all families, males in Long Creek headed 100 percent. This aspect of Long Creek family structure affirms the general domination of males in nineteenth-century western pioneering.16

The age and gender composition of Long Creek valley inhabitants reflects the community's frontier complexion. In 1880 the valley contained a higher proportion of children, young adults, and males than either the country or the state of Oregon as a whole. In this regard Long Creek appeared similar to the Willamette Valley frontier population of 1850, when males made up 61 percent of the population and children below the age of 10 constituted 31 percent of the total. By 1900 the differences between age and gender patterns in Long Creek valley and those in the nation or state had lessened; however, the preponderance of males and of children below age 20 still skewed the gender and age distribution from national and state norms. A comparison of the census data on median ages for the entire United States and for Long Creek valley also confirms the continuing youthful nature of the valley's population. In 1880 the median age in the United States was 20.9 years; in Long Creek it was 19.2. The median figures for 1900 were 22.9 and 20.9 years, respectively. Again, the median age of 19.2 years in Long Creek in 1880 virtually replicated that of Oregonians in 1850: 19.1 years.17

The relatively younger ages in Long Creek valley stemmed from the sharply reduced average age of females. Nationally in 1880 the average age of females had risen to 26.0, but in Long Creek valley it had climbed only to 24.7 years. On the other hand, the average age of males in Long Creek valley came remarkably close to the national figures in both census years: males in Long Creek averaged 24.2 years in 1880 and 27.0 in 1900; the national average stood at 24.8 and 26.5 years, respectively.18

Age also had an impact on the economic viability of the newly settled community, all of whose inhabitants could be classified as either producers or dependents. Those between ages 15 and 65 made up the able bodied, and the rest of the population relied on them for support. Large numbers of dependents strained the re-

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Upper portion of a manuscript page from the 1900 census for the town of Long Creek. Categories of information collected by the decennial U.S. censuses provide important data for the reconstruction of community and regional histories. For example, on lines 14–17 we see that George Ward was head of a household of four that included...
his wife, Emma, his son, and his nephew. We also note, among other data, that George Ward was born in September 1860 and was thirty-nine at the time of his last birthday. (Author’s coll.; ons neg. OrHi 90733)
sources of an infant settlement, possibly encouraging the inhabitants to limit the proportion of dependents. Long Creek valley in 1880 faced such a situation, since the population consisted of 83 dependents per 100 producers. This relationship differed only slightly from the 87.6-per-100 dependency ratio that prevailed in the rural Willamette Valley in 1850. By 1900 Long Creek valley’s number of dependents had dropped to 66 per 100 producers.¹⁹

Gender imbalance registered greater in Long Creek valley in 1880 than on the western Oregon frontier of 1850. Men outnumbered women 1.38 to 1 in the rural Willamette Valley, whereas the ratio reached 1.73 to 1 in Long Creek valley. By 1900 the male-to-female ratio in Long Creek valley had dropped only to 1.43 to 1. Since American men in the nineteenth century had greater social and geographic mobility than women, these figures are not surprising. The age-gender profile of Long Creek valley during the late nineteenth century dictated a largely dependent status for women. For instance, no Long Creek female headed a family in 1880.²⁰

Recent historical studies of the American family have corrected the traditional view that families before the modern era (ca. 1900) consisted primarily of large, extended units, encompassing numerous children and several generations. Evidence from Long Creek valley supports this relatively new demographic picture of the past three hundred years: a “typical” American family that was both nuclear in structure and similar in size to present-day families. While families prior to the twentieth century had more children than families of today, the difference has been much exaggerated.

The typical household and family structure in frontier Long Creek valley consisted of a nuclear family with 3 or fewer children; rarely were additional relatives present. In 1880 nuclear households accounted for 89 percent of the total; in 1900, 64 percent. A subsequent decline in the number of nuclear families in the valley resulted not from an increase in extended households over the twenty-year period; but rather from an increase (3.5 to 27.9 percent) in households of “primary individuals”—that is, persons who lived either alone or with one or more nonrelatives—between 1880 and 1900. Extended families held steady at about 8 percent over that time.

The data from Long Creek valley on household and family structure deviate slightly from the findings of other recent studies of late nineteenth-century rural and urban communities. These investigations have found that nuclear families comprised 75 to 80 percent of the total households, extended groups made up an-
other 12 to 15 percent, and single-member households accounted for about 3 to 5 percent. The Long Creek valley census data for 1880 and 1900 indicate that the percentage of extended households held stable, at a figure below the level reported in other studies. On the other hand, the percentage of households of primary individuals registered a sizable increase in the valley by 1900, chiefly at the expense of nuclear households. Further analysis of the census schedules reveals that the heads of primary-individual households were male (35 of 38), single (30), and middle aged (43.2 years). Slightly over half of the total primary heads (21) were farmers or farm laborers; the remainder lived in town and either owned businesses or worked at a variety of nonagricultural jobs.

The 3 female heads of primary-individual households lived in town, where 1 operated a hotel (divorced, age 45); another, a millinery shop (single, age 33); and the third worked as a dressmaker (widowed, age 47). As a predominantly agricultural community, Long Creek offered few opportunities for single, independent women. The large percentage of Long Creek valley households consisting of primary individuals contrasts sharply with the findings from other urban or rural areas studied to date. Only future work using the 1900 census will show whether Long Creek valley typified other turn-of-the-century farm communities in this respect.

The sizable number of single-person households reported by the census taker in 1900 also helps account for the observed decrease in mean (average) household size. Between 1880 and 1900 mean household size dropped from 5.35 to 3.85 persons. Of 136 households in 1900, 33 (24.3 percent) consisted of single persons living alone. Excluding these individuals from the calculations, the mean size of households was 4.76. A less dramatic decline in primary-family (the family of a household head, including blood relatives who do not make up a separate family within the household) size over the twenty-year period supports this interpretation: Between 1880 and 1900, mean family size for this group declined from 4.92 to 4.52 persons. Furthermore, the apparently strong preference for separate-household living arrangements

"The prevailing family structure in Long Creek valley ... did not offer women significant opportunities to develop life-styles different from traditional norms."
suggests an explanation for the small number of extended families present in the census.

If persons outside the nuclear family resided in the household, they were usually nonfamily, such as boarders, laborers, or servants. In contrast to one study of urban households showing that 20 to 30 percent of the occupants were boarders and lodgers, only 18 percent of Long Creek valley households in 1880 contained such nonfamily members. Among the few Long Creek families with relatives present, only 1 included a parent of the household head or spouse. Unrelated persons residing with primary families did not form secondary families within those households. In 1900 approximately the same mixture of nuclear family members and those outside the nuclear family continued within Long Creek.

Paul Gruppe (shown here) homesteaded in Ritter, on the breaks of the Middle Fork of the John Day River, a few miles north of Long Creek. Gruppe, a master carpenter, built many homes and commercial structures in northern Grant County, including...
valley households. Any increase in household occupants outside the nuclear family came in the form of additional nonfamily members rather than relatives. In those few families with relatives present, only 2 included a parent of the household head or spouse. The percentage of households containing boarders and lodgers actually decreased from 18 to 16 between the two censuses.

As the Long Creek valley community grew between 1880 and 1900, the typical family became smaller. For instance, over the twenty-year period the single-child family became the norm in the valley. As an explanation for this, we can rule out the factor of families being in different life-cycle phases at the time of the two censuses. In both the 1880 and the 1900 census, 21 percent of the spouses were in their thirties, that is, near the end of their child-

his own home and outbuildings, pictured above. (Author's coll.; OHS neg. OrHi 90725)
bearing years and before their present children had begun leaving home. Between 1880 and 1900, moreover, the ages of married couples increased. In 1880 the mean ages of heads of household and their spouses stood at 42 and 33 years, respectively; in 1900 the mean had increased to 45 and 38 years. The proportion of households represented by couples in their twenties actually declined by half: Married couples in this age bracket accounted for 40 percent of the total in 1880 and only 20 percent in 1900. With fewer newly formed families and a greater number of older families present, the number of children per family ought to have increased rather than decreased as observed. It appears that Long Creek valley couples practiced some form of family limitation.

Demographers have noted that the American birthrate declined throughout the nineteenth century. This observed fertility decline was at first explained in terms of rising urbanism and industrialism. Several recent studies, however, have questioned the significance of these two factors in accounting for fertility trends in the United States. During the last century, moreover, the United States was mainly a rural, agricultural nation. As late as 1900, 60.3 percent of the population still lived in what the Census Bureau defined as rural territory.25

The few existing studies of fertility in rural areas generally relate the decline in births to the decreasing availability of farmland.
especially within older regions. Unfortunately, most of these studies analyze census data only from the first half of the nineteenth century. One such study, based on a sample of farm families in the northern states drawn from the census of 1860, found fertility in newer settlements higher than in older ones. Using a standard measure of fertility, the ratio of children under age 10 to married women aged 20–49, the sample-study results varied from 1.37 in older settlements to 2.07 in newer ones. If we apply the same measure of fertility in Long Creek valley, we see a childwoman ratio of 2.56 in 1880 and 1.66 in 1900. Long Creek valley thus followed a pattern of declining fertility comparable to that shown in the study based on a sample from the 1860 census.

The 1900 census also collected information on the number of children “ever born” and “still living,” data that allow measurement of the cumulative fertility of women up to specified points in the childbearing years, and that give some indication of the cumulative mortality of children over the life span of their mothers. Further studies of the 1900 census for other communities will reveal whether the Long Creek valley data on the number of children “ever born” and “still living” are typical of rural places in America at the turn of the century.

This analysis of the 1880 and 1900 census records for Long Creek valley conforms to the general pattern of late nineteenth-century family structure established by recent studies in historical demography. The typical household consisted of a nuclear family headed by a married couple with 3 or fewer children; additional relatives or nonfamily members were rarely present. In several respects the typical Long Creek valley household in 1900 strikingly resembled today’s typical household. The mean household size in the United States moved from 4.8 persons in 1900 to 3.1 in 1970; Long Creek valley’s mean household size was already under 4 (3.9) in 1900. Even more dramatically, single-person households in the valley increased from 3.6 percent in 1880 to 27.9 in 1900. In fact, the percentage of such households in Long Creek valley in 1900 exceeded that recorded for the United States in 1970 (19.6).

The census data further reveal Long Creek valley as an agricultural community composed mostly of white, native-born, literate farmers and their families. A majority of the inhabitants lived on their own farms and homes, which they owned free of mortgages.
The Long Creek Comet Band (here ca. 1910) was a fixture at local celebrations throughout Grant County between about 1890 and 1920. (Author's coll.; ohs neg. OrHi 90731)

The valley prospered enough to support an incorporated town, offering a limited range of professional and business services.

The prevailing family structure in Long Creek valley, as portrayed in census and other local records, did not offer women significant opportunities to develop life-styles different from traditional norms. Few women lived alone or operated businesses independently. Teaching represented the sole profession practiced by women. No Long Creek valley women played leading, public roles in such locally active reform movements as the Farmers' Alliance or Prohibition, and the drive for woman suffrage attracted scant attention in the community. In short, during the period of migration and community formation, Long Creek valley women did little to challenge traditional notions of their role in the community and society. On the other hand, valley women did appear to assert some measure of independent control over their family lives by practicing fertility limitation. Even in this area, though, they represented part of a larger, national trend. For the most part, women in Long Creek valley conformed to the norms of late nineteenth-century female behavior. William Bowen's description of women's position on the western Oregon frontier of 1850 could apply equally to the late nineteenth-century pioneer period of eastern Oregon:

In the absence of modern society's alternatives, pioneer women...
were forced to rely almost wholly on the traditional family structure for economic survival and status. A few brave individuals might find employment as teachers, seamstresses, or perhaps entertainers, but the vast majority were bound first to their fathers and then to their husbands.31

Much research still needs to be done on the farm families of the late nineteenth-century West before we will have a complete picture of their structure and behavior. Certainly, the stability of family structure and women's traditional role within it, as displayed in census records during the process of community formation and growth on the eastern Oregon frontier, is arresting. Future demographic studies of other frontier communities will determine how typical were Long Creek valley's patterns of life for women and the family during the homesteading period.

The foregoing discussion of Long Creek valley during its frontier years reveals many elements that influenced the process of community formation. If the key ingredients of community are a common sense of values and mutual obligations among a limited number of persons who share a strong sense of place, then the census data suggest that the necessary conditions existed to promote a sense of community among the early Long Creek valley settlers.32 The relatively enclosed geographical setting of the valley imposed the same physical and climatic conditions on all who chose to live there. The small number of valley inhabitants—never more than 600—carried on frequent face-to-face interactions.

The relatively small number of settlers in Long Creek valley displayed many of the characteristics known to foster common community values and outlook. Long Creek inhabitants were racially and ethnically homogeneous and generally came from the same region of the country. Foreign-born persons never constituted more than a small percentage of the population. Most Long Creek valley pioneers started as homesteaders, earning their livelihood by small-scale farming and livestock operations; the valley's townspeople remained economically dependent on the agricultural sector throughout the first twenty-five years of settlement. During the early period of settlement, neither absentee landownership nor crushing mortgage debt altered the relatively level economic terrain, reflected in the widespread existence of owner-occupied homes and farms. In addition, the valley's relative isolation
and poor transportation links to the outside world served to limit economic opportunity and prevent economic stratification.

Above all, the prevailing family structure represented another common bond among the inhabitants of Long Creek valley. The continued pattern of traditional, male-dominated nuclear families promoted a sense of mutuality and tradition. As this powerful social unit mediated between the individual and the larger community, it provided a homogeneous life-style and a defined set of personal loyalties. Kinship ties also reinforced a sense of mutuality among the valley settlers.

The actual interplay and working out of these ingredients of community, as revealed in the census records, is yet to be fully delineated. The outward manifestations, such as town government, schools, churches, businesses, fraternal orders, and political groups, should be studied over time in order to assess fully the process of community building and its relationship to frontier family life.33

Certainly, some of the factors promoting community could have worked (and perhaps did work) to an opposite effect. Family and kinship ties, for instance, can provide identities and ties independent of, and at conflict with, the surrounding community.
Shared economic hardships, natural disasters, and limited agricultural opportunities can, for example, divide farmers and ranchers, depending on individual resources, abilities, and luck. In the case of Long Creek, the emergence of a town and its institutions brought different opportunities and promoted an outlook potentially at variance with the agricultural sector.

In short, Long Creek valley census records provide data permitting an in-depth study of family life and community formation on the isolated eastern Oregon frontier of the late nineteenth century. Completion of such an investigation will require use of other local sources such as tax lists, land records, vital statistics, town and county government records, maps, newspapers, photographs, and oral histories. Evaluated in total, such historical sources provide a level of description that allows a full-scale analysis of community and family life.
Notes

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1. For background on the settlement of eastern Oregon, see D. W. Meinig, The Great Columbia Plain: A Historical Geography, 1805–1910 (Seattle 1968); Carlos A. Schwantes, The Pacific Northwest (Lincoln, NE 1989); and An Illustrated History of Baker, Grant, Malheur, and Harney Counties (Spokane, WA 1902).


5. Ibid.; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, Fourteenth Census of the United States. State Compendium, Oregon, 13, 18. Statistical tables prepared by the author in conjunction with an earlier version of this article are available in the manuscripts department of the Oregon Historical Society Research Library.

6. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Tenth Census Population Schedules, Microfilm Publication Number T9, Roll 1081 (Washington, DC). The 1890 U.S. Census schedules no longer exist; nor do the Grant County schedules for state censuses taken every ten years between 1875 and 1905.


8. After Oregon, only three states were the birthplace of a significant number of inhabitants in 1900: Arkansas, 28 (5.4 percent); Illinois, 19 (3.6 percent); and Missouri, 19 (3.6 percent).

9. In 1900 almost twice as many persons engaged in agriculture in Long Creek valley than in either Oregon (35.7 percent) or the nation as a whole (34.5 percent). See U.S. Bureau of the Census, Twelfth Census of the United States, Taken in the Year 1900 (Washington, DC 1902), vol. 2.


11. Eagle (June 1894); East Oregonian (Jan. 10, 1895); and Illustrated
History, 409-15.
14. Literacy rates for Long Creek valley compare favorably with those for the entire state. In 1880 the Oregon rate was 94.3 percent for those 10 years and older; in 1900 it was 96.7 percent. For the entire nation the literacy rate stood at 89.3 percent in 1900 and 83.0 percent in 1880. See The Statistical History of the United States (New York 1976), 382.
17. In 1880 Long Creek valley included 95 males and 55 females; in 1900 the totals were 216, respectively. See Statistical History, 19; and Bowen "Oregon Frontiersman," 184-86.
22. At the very least, the Long Creek valley data call into question Hareven's assertion that "solitary residence was virtually unknown in nineteenth-century society." See Hareven and Vinovskis, eds., Family and Population, 15. For data on household structure and composition on the pre–Civil War frontier, see Davis, Frontier America, 35-76.
23. John Modell and Tamara Hareven, "Urbanization and the Malleable Household: Boarding and Lodging in Nineteenth-Century Families," Journal of Marriage and the Family 35 (Aug. 1973), 467-79. In 1880 Long Creek valley had .18 relatives present per household and .36 nonrelatives; by 1900 the figures were .13 and .26, respectively. Easterlin reported results similar to the Long Creek data on household composition. See Easterlin et al., "Farms and Farm Families," 36.
24. A secondary family unit is any additional family within the household that does not contain any members of the primary family.
25. Seward, American Family, 111-58; and Statistical History, 11.
26. See Hareven and Vinovskis, eds., Family and Population, 4-9, for an evaluation of the literature on fertility in rural areas.
27. Easterlin et al., "Farms and Farm Families," 36.
28. In 1880, 46 children under 10 years of age lived in Long Creek valley; in 1900 there were 118; in 1880, 20 children were under 5 years of age; in 1900 there were 53. Eighteen married women aged 20-49 resided in the community in 1880 and 71 in 1900. Because of the small number of examples, it did not seem useful to calculate
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age-specific fertility ratios, or to standardize the Long Creek valley data by age in order to eliminate differences in fertility ratios resulting from concentration of married women in especially high-fertility age groups. For a discussion of fertility ratios at the household level using federal census data, see Tamara Hareven and Maris Vinovskis, “Patterns of Childbearing in Late Nineteenth-Century America: The Determinants of Marital Fertility in Five Massachusetts Towns in 1880,” in Hareven and Vinovskis, eds., Family and Population, 88-94.

29. For comparison, the percentage of single-person households in the United States in 1880 and 1900 was 3.0 and 5.1, respectively. See Historical Statistics, 42.

30. These conclusions are based on oral interviews conducted by the author and a close reading of extant newspapers of the period.


32. For an introduction to community studies, see Thomas Bender, Community and Social Change in America (Baltimore 1978); and Robert V. Hine, Community on the American Frontier (Norman, OK 1980). Two studies discuss the process of community formation on the midwestern frontier in the midnineteenth century: Don Harrison Doyle, The Social Order of a Frontier Community: Jacksonville, Illinois, 1825–70 (Urbana, IL 1978); and John Mack Faragher, Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie (New Haven, CT 1986).

33. The author is carrying out such a study and welcomes information on this topic.