

Who was Kitty Newell?

The story of Kitty Newell is part of a chapter of Oregon history that has, until recently, been largely ignored.

A trail near the campground will take you to the grave of Kitty Newell. It seems like an odd place for a grave; on forested, sloping land near Champoeg Creek. You will find a lone stone marker, placed there by the Daughters of the American Revolution. Who was she? Why is she all alone?

In the 1830s, Robert Newell and Joe Meek were partners. They were “mountain men”—independent American trappers and traders in the fur business. Among their customers were the Nimi’ipuu tribe—known to most people as the Nez Perce—whose homeland included much of Oregon, Washington and Idaho.

Good relations with Native Americans were essential to fur trappers. Trust needed to be established both ways, and nothing cemented a relationship more firmly than a marriage. So in 1834, Newell married a young Nez Perce woman. Four years later, Meek married her sister. We can assume the sisters were roughly 13 or 14 when they married—the common age at that time and place. Unfortunately, we don’t know their real names, but in married life they became Kitty Newell and Virginia Meek.

Besides bringing good relations with the Nez Perce, Kitty would have been an invaluable helpmate for her new husband. The trapper’s life was very hard, requiring a woman to raise children, make clothing, find and prepare food, and assist with the fur operation while moving from place to place in the wild. Whereas few white women possessed the needed skills, Native women learned them as they grew up. Most trappers—for practical reasons—had Native wives.



Brian Z Snyder

Into the Valley of Death

By 1840, the fur trade was collapsing. The Newells left the mountains for a farming life in the Willamette Valley, eventually settling just east of the town of Champoeg in 1843.

Oregon at that time was not a healthy place for anyone, but especially not for Native Americans. Introduced diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis were causing widespread death among the tribes who lived here, as well as among the Indian people who had immigrated. Kitty Newell, in her mid-twenties, died in 1845, leaving behind her husband

Key Concepts

- The first generation of Oregon settlers consisted mostly of men from the fur trade and their Indian wives.
- After the Americanization of Oregon, some of the Indian wives and their children were forced onto the reservation at Grand Ronde, while others integrated into Oregon society.
- Oregonians are now interested in learning about their Indian ancestors.



Champoeg State Heritage Area

Like other trappers throughout the West, Joseph Meek (left) and Robert Newell married Indian women for practical reasons.

and five sons. Happily, Virginia Meek, who also moved to the valley, lived until 1900, a quarter century longer than her famous husband.

The Newells and the Meeks were hardly unusual. If we look at the original settlers of Oregon, from 1811 to 1842, we find that (a) nearly all the men were from the fur trade, and so preferred Indian wives, and (b) there simply were no white

women in the Oregon Territory anyway.¹ The men were mostly French Canadians (who were often part Indian themselves) or Americans; the women were mostly from tribes outside the Willamette Valley, plus some Kalapuya, the valley natives. Generally speaking, the Willamette Valley was settled by white men² and Indian women. Their children—an entire generation—were half and half, or in French, Métis (“MEH-tee”).

Another trail of tears

Problems began after 1843, when the first large wagon trains of Americans began arriving over the Oregon Trail. From then on, the valley was increasingly dominated by American culture. Unfortunately, Americans were shockingly intolerant of non-Caucasians, including Indians and their “half-breed”³ children. The stage was being set for years of heartbreak.

In 1856, all Indians in the Willamette Valley were forced onto the reservation at Grande Ronde (today we would call this “ethnic cleansing”). Officially, this included the Indian wives, regardless of tribe, and their children. The husbands were under great pressure. What actually happened to their families depended upon the individual man—his social status and his moral strength.

Men with high status—those with wealth or power—could protect their families just by being who they were. No one dared approach Joe Meek, John McLoughlin, or Donald Manson about their wives or children.⁴

1 Exception: beginning in 1837, a handful of American wives and teachers came to the Methodist mission (Willamette Mission State Park).

2 There were also men of African descent, a number of Hawaiians, and others.

3 This derogatory term was commonly used until the 1970s.

4 John McLoughlin, chief factor of the Hudson’s Bay Company,

Men with lower status faced difficult choices. Some husbands did exactly what society expected of them: they packed their families off to Grand Ronde and then married white women. Others realized that they could not win, but refused to be separated from their loved ones. They chose to move to the reservation with their families.

A strong father was not a guarantee of safety, however, once the children grew up and left home. Young Métis men were often not accepted into society, and might still end up on the reservation, or be forced to emigrate to another country to find acceptance. Young women, especially if they were educated, were more likely to integrate into Oregon society. Their Indian heritage was conveniently ignored by their new families and by generations of descendants, who, if pressed, might whisper that great-grandmother was an Indian.

Happily, today's descendants have a different attitude. They want to know who great-grandmother was, and find out as much of her story as they can. Unfortunately, after years of concealment, the infor-

ran the Oregon Territory from the 1820s to the 1840s. His wife, Marguerite, was half Indian. They retired to Oregon City and became American citizens. Donald Manson, also of Hudson's Bay, set up his farmstead where the Visitor Center now stands. His wife, Felicité, was also half Indian. Both men were intimidating Scots who brooked no nonsense.



Courtesy of St. Paul Historical Society

Marie Poirier and her daughter, Cecile Délard. Young Métis women, if they were educated, could often marry into Oregon society, their Indian heritage conveniently forgotten by their new families. However, society's door was usually closed to their brothers.

mation has often been lost. And this brings us back to Kitty Newell.

Why was Kitty buried east of Champoeg Creek, when her home was west of the creek? At that time, the wagon road from Champoeg to Oregon City ran through the Newells' farm, then straight east across a bridge over the creek. When you walk up to Kitty's grave, you are walking on a small piece of that ancient road. But why there, exactly? Maybe that place had been special to her, or Robert knew it was not suitable for farming, and so would remain undisturbed. That is a part of her story we will never know.



Courtesy Helen E. Austin

Oregon's early mixed-race heritage is apparent in this photo of Champoege's school children, circa 1859.

Further Reading

- Children of the Fur Trade: Forgotten Métis of the Pacific Northwest, by John C. Jackson, Oregon State University Press, 2007
- Into the Eye of the Setting Sun, by Charlotte Matheny Kirkwood. Available in the Visitor Center, or search on the web. Charlotte Matheny came over the Oregon Trail in 1843, when she was five

years old. This reminiscence covers her childhood until marriage. Writing when she was an old woman, she had a phenomenal memory, and her writing style is excellent. Although the book has only been published by the family, it is a must-read for anyone interested in the details of Willamette Valley life in the 1840s and '50s.

The development of this material was made possible through a grant from the Helen E. Austin Pioneer Fund of The Oregon Community Foundation. More topics are available at the Champoege State Heritage Area Visitor Center, or download copies at www.Champoege.org



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