Waldo Hills

The Waldo Hills are situated on the east side of the mid Willamette Valley, beginning nine miles from Salem. The hills run north to south between Silverton and Sublimity and range in elevation from 400 to 800 feet. The hills originally formed over sixteen million years ago when lava from the Columbia Basin flowed through gaps in the old Cascade Mountains. The Waldo Hills were named for Daniel Waldo, an influential settler who was part of the Great Migration of 1843.

Humans have inhabited this area for at least 13,000 years. Archaeological evidence suggests that indigenous people lived along the Cascade foothills long before they moved into the valley to avoid flooding and wet conditions at the end of the last glacial period. The Pudding River (*ha'nt'cyuk*) and Santiam bands of the Kalapuya were the primary inhabitants before EuroAmerican settlement.

The Waldo Hills provided plenty for seasonal gathering and hunting. Forested canyons sheltered game as well as berries, nuts, medicinal herbs, and woody shrubs for basketry, arrows, and sweat lodges. Numerous streams and beaver ponds harbored aquatic species. Massive fir and cedar trees provided shelter, and windfall cedars were used to construct plank houses. Extensive upland prairies contained tarweed and acorns, while camas thrived in oak woodlands. Sedges, reeds, skunk cabbage, and other useful plants grew in wet streamside prairies.

The Kalapuyans' use of fire enhanced food variety and increased biological diversity, creating a landscape of open prairies with broadly formed Oregon white oaks, forested canyons, and lush riparian areas. When fire practices ended, thick brush grew over the unmanaged prairie.

At the time of settlement, the Molalla people occupied upper elevations of the hills. A major north-south trading route to Willamette Falls crossed here rather than the valley, "for the valley was high in mud in the winter, high in tall grass in summer." The route was first known as the Molalla Indian Trail and later the East Side Territorial Road; it is now Cascade Highway.

The area was attractive to white settlers. In 1851, Donation Land Claim surveyors described the land as "hilly and Broken but not enough so as to prevent a general Cultivation," mostly "Prairie with the Exception of strips of Timber along the Streams," and "well watered with Springs and Mountain Streams."

Daniel Waldo had arrived in 1843 from Missouri with sixty head of American cattle. Settling in the hill country to avoid malaria in lowlands, he helped new settlers and funded some of the valley's first industries. He served as legislator, district judge, and county treasurer. His son, John B. Waldo, became an Oregon Supreme Court Justice and wilderness preservationist.

Timothy Davenport settled in the Waldo Hills and married Florinda Geer, daughter of Waldo Hills' nurseryman Ralph C. Geer. A surveyor, writer, farmer, and shopkeeper, Davenport was a member of the Oregon House of Representatives and State Senate and served as Indian agent to the Umatilla Reservation from 1862 to 1863. Davenport became known as the "sage of Silverton." His son, Homer Davenport, became an influential political cartoonist for Hearst publications. T.T. Geer, Oregon's first native-son governor and cousin of Ralph Geer, farmed land on the western edge of the Waldo Hills.

Today, farmers in the Waldo Hills grow grass seed, wheat, oats, Christmas trees, and vineyards along with pasture and timberlands. Occasional remnant oaks still grace hilltop grass seed fields, serving as testament to the once abundant savanna and prairie. Though Daniel Waldo's home stands in disrepair, the original homestead of Ralph Geer now serves as the historic GeerCrest Farm and Historical Society.

Written by Tina Schweickert

Further Reading:

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