

## A History of Ontario, Oregon

Were it not for James Virtue, William Morfitt, Mary Richardson and Daniel Smith, Ontario would now be called Morton.

In March of 1884, Richard Welch started a Post Office for the quartet at Ontario, so named by James Virtue after Ontario, Canada. Two months later Joseph Morton applied for a Morton Post Office at an island about one mile south of town, with Oscar Scott as Postmaster. Unfortunately for Morton and Scott, merchants Morfitt and Richardson of Malheur City, gold miner Virtue, and lumberman Smith of Baker acquired more land and were better financed. More importantly, Morfitt had negotiated a depot for Ontario. All the settlers and speculators knew the railroad was coming and how important that would be to Ontario's future. So Scott closed his Morton Post Office and built a hotel at present day Ontario. By December, Scott was Ontario's Postmaster.

The town continued to grow with the arrival of the Oregon Short Line Railroad in late 1884, and freight and passenger service were added to the town's offerings. Soon after, stock began arriving from Eastern Oregon's cattle ranches to Ontario's stockyard for transshipment to markets throughout the Pacific Northwest. Ontario became one of the largest stockyards in the West. In addition, the construction of the Nevada Ditch and other canals aided the burgeoning agricultural industry, adding those products to Ontario's exports.

In February 1887, Malheur County was carved away from Baker County, with Vale named as County Seat. In 1888, 1890 and 1900, Vale was confirmed by a vote of the electorate as the seat, to Ontario's dismay. The town didn't give up until 1913, when one last effort was made to move the seat of government to Ontario, but that vote also failed.

For a few years beginning in 1903, Ontario experimented with a salmon hatchery on Morton's Island. But despite great effort and heavy runs at times, the hatchery could not get off the ground. Increased fishing on the Columbia and dams to supply water for agriculture slowed and finally ended all salmon runs into this area.

The town's growth and daily events have been chronicled from its beginnings by a series of newspapers. The County's first paper was the *Atlas*, followed by the *Malheur Gazette*, then the *Ontario News* and in 1900 the *Argus*, which continues to this day. Although there were a number of other papers in the early 1900's, only the *Argus* and the *Malheur Enterprise* continue to operate today.

The Malheur County Fair was started in 1910; Holy Rosary Hospital opened its doors in 1912; and the first City Hall was built in 1913. Ontario supplied soldiers, sailors and airmen for both World War I and II, but sadly not all returned. In the period between wars, the City built a fire department, a police department and a series of parks. The first golf course was developed on the current site of Treasure Valley Community College in 1938.

Ontario is a religious community and as the town developed so did churches. All the major denominations are represented, from The Assembly of God to the United Church of Christ, with everything in-between.

Although various businesses have kept Ontario residents employed from the date of the town's founding, it wasn't until 1947 that the Grigg brothers built their produce operation, soon becoming the town's largest employer. Ore-Ida was sold to H. J. Heinz in 1965 and was the area's largest employer until the Snake River Correctional Facility opened in 1991.

Ontario's organizations parallel most major cities and include the Kiwanis Club, the Japanese American Citizens League, the Basque Club, the Lions, the Elks, the Rotary Club, the Chamber of Commerce, a Historical Society, a Community Concert Association and many others. The City also is home to Treasure Valley Community College; the Four Rivers Cultural Center; and a large community library.

The city is a vibrant community, growing towards a better future for its citizens. The city's mission is to provide a safe, healthful, sound economic environment, progressively enhancing our quality of life.