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Dear Kathryn:

Here is a summary of the questions that we discussed, and the answers that I gave you, regarding the location of Letitia Carson's grave:

How and why did you become interested in learning about early Oregon black history?

As a child, my grandmother would occasionally tell me stories of our pioneer ancestors and how they came to live in the Oregon Territory during the 1840s and 1850s. Later, while recuperating from a serious illness in 1977, I read a series of books regarding a fictional family's role in helping to shape the history of the United States. During the course of these readings, I gradually came to realize that my grandmother's stories often paralleled - and were usually more interesting and exciting than - the stories contained in the novels.

Following this realization, my recreational reading habits changed almost immediately. I stopped reading fiction and poetry and began reading journals and correspondence kept by my ancestors and other early settlers and visitors to the Pacific Northwest. Of particular interest to me were the many significant individuals I encountered that were absent from the histories I had been required to read in public schools. For the most part, these people had not left a written record, and had thereby passed nearly unnoticed by scholars dependent upon such writings for their own work. For another thing, many of these people were not influential white males, around whom most of our traditional written histories have been centered.

Through time, I became particularly interested in the lives and contributions of individual women, blacks, Hawaiians, and Indians in the Oregon Country between 1788 and 1848.

What kinds of specific research have you used in your studies?

Most of my information on early Oregon history has been derived from diaries, ship logs, journals, correspondence, legal actions, surveys, maps, census records, and other private papers and official documents. Several publications appearing in the Oregon Historical Quarterly, its predecessors, and other historical journals and magazines have provided good leads and reliable transcriptions. Newspaper articles and obituaries, and oral histories and interviews gathered during the 1930s by Works Project Administration (WPA) have also been of use.

When did you first learn about Letitia Carson?

Around 1985 I was engaged in tracing the routes of Jedediah Smith's 1828 travels in western Oregon. Assuming that he brought his horses down the western side of the Willamette River on his return to Fort Vancouver during the fall of that year, I began to research the original land surveys and maps made during the 1850s for clues as to where he may have traveled. An entry for north Benton County, titled variously as "Claim 44" or "Estate of David Carson," caught my eye. Virtually every other claim in the territory was listed by the man, woman or heirs of record. Why this particular claim had gone into a state of disputed ownership intrigued me.

I sent away to the Oregon State Archives for an answer and was sent nearly \$30 worth of copies regarding a series of legal actions that had taken place between 1852 and 1857! These actions revolved around David Carson's widow, a former Kentucky slave named Letitia Carson.

David Carson was a white, Irish mountain man that had come with Letitia to Oregon in 1845. On the overland journey west, a daughter, Martha, was 2born to the couple. David subsequently played an important role in the establishment of the Barlow Trail during his family's migration to their homestead along Soap Creek, a few miles north of present-day Corvallis.

At the time of his death in 1852, slavery was illegal in Oregon, and so was being black. In fact, black people were not legally allowed to reside here until the 1920s, and interracial marriages were illegal until the early 1950s! Carson's widow - Letitia - wasn't considered to be a member of his family (or even his property) by unscrupulous white neighbors that were interested in obtaining the family's land and possessions for themselves. Letitia fought for her rights through the courts, and received a small measure of satisfaction after a battle that lasted nearly 5 years.

How did you find her gravesite?

In 1987, I entered Oregon State University and resumed my college education. A project undertaken in one class involved researching the history of Tampico, an early ghost town established near the location of "Claim 44" in 1857, and vacated in 1860. During the course of the study my research partner, Janet Meranda, came across an article printed in 1981 regarding Letitia Carson's life in Douglas County during the 1870s and 1880s. A footnote to the article describes how a government forester had discovered her gravesite in a pioneer cemetery near the town of Myrtle Creek. The footnote also listed the legal description for the site.

Last summer, Jan and I took a trip to Douglas County in order to find Letitia's grave. The family that now owns the land was extremely helpful in directing us to the grave's location, as well as encouraging us to take whatever steps are necessary to see that the cemetery is properly recognized and cared for.

What should be done next?

Letitia Carson is an important pioneer in Oregon's history. In addition to being one of the first black people to cross the Oregon Trail, she engaged in a significant legal battle at a time when our state was framing its constitution and our nation was bracing for Civil War. Her son, Jack, was one of the first black people born in Oregon, in 1849. He is buried next to his mother, and a house he constructed around the turn of the century still stands in Myrtle Point. Both the pioneer cemetery and Carson's house deserve nomination to the National Register of Historic Places in order to ensure that they are properly recognized and preserved.

Black history and educational organizations such as the Friends of the Golden West, as well as such recognized institutions as the Oregon Historical Society, should take a leadership role in seeing that Letitia Carson takes her proper place in our state's history.

Bob Zybach is a 42-year-old undergraduate in OSU's College of Forestry. For the past two years he has been employed by OSU Research Forests as an historian and cultural resource specialist. Letitia Carson's Benton County homestead is currently owned by OSU, and this has allowed Bob to focus a portion of his research on her life and accomplishments. An article based on his research is being prepared for publication in the Oregon Historical Quarterly.

Well, I think this covers everything that we discussed, as well as a few points that came to mind as I was typing this up. There should be plenty here for an article - maybe even a small feature. Please don't hesitate to add anything you might feel would be of benefit. Maybe a small "insert" explaining the goals and history of Friends of the Golden West would be useful (at least for generating interest, funding, and/or membership!).

Naturally, don't hesitate to call if there is anything else I can do to help you get Letitia's story out. But please remember to credit OSU Research Forests for encouraging and funding the location of her grave. Earlier research on her legal battles was accomplished through my own interest and resources.

Did you get your computer lined out yet? I hope your (major) problems are behind you. Perhaps this story will make a good first test of your new software. I typed this thing up (complete with italics) in less than two hours. And, I still haven't learned to type. Or even learned a single DOS command!

Hope to see you soon.

Best wishes,

Bob