

An Alpine History Mystery:

The Unlikely Homesteader

January 2015

Here's a mini-history lesson that had a big impact on Alpine's early development. On May 20, 1862 Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act, a hand-written law that opened up federal lands to settlement. Under the law a U.S. citizen who had never taken up arms against the U.S. Government and who was the head of a household or was at least 21 years of age could file an application to claim up to 160 acres of unappropriated federal land in public land states. The law prescribed a simple three-step process: file an application for unclaimed land, improve the land, and file for a deed of title. But before filing for the deed of title, the applicants had to live on the land for 5 years. Then to claim legal title to their land, homesteader had to complete a "Proving Up" Form, and had to find two neighbors who were willing to swear that they had known the homesteader for 5 years and that all the requirements of the law were met.

Many early settlers in Alpine, including Edward Foss, Adam Beaty, and Nicholas Peutz, took advantage of this opportunity to establish a homestead. But another homesteader arrived here in the early 1880's to apply for a claim to land in Alpine Heights, and this amazing person is the subject of our mystery.

Tall and slim with a dark complexion, black hair and brown eyes, our mystery homesteader, whom we will call Willett, was born in Bangor, Maine. At age 24 Willett moved to Ohio to teach in a one-room schoolhouse constructed in the style of a log cabin. In fact, Willett's resume' could boast teaching positions in several other states including Illinois, Kentucky and Maine. Then in about 1880, Willett chose to leave teaching behind and become a homesteader in Alpine.

The land, to which Willett staked a claim held some fine oak trees and a good source of sweet, clean spring water. To "prove up" the land, our mystery settler had a house, barn and corral constructed. No doubt this former teacher's lessons in botany helped in establishing gardens and orchards that were nearly always present on homesteads in Alpine. And we can only imagine that the lessons in astronomy, taught back east not long before, came breathlessly to life in the clear dark night sky on that hilltop in Alpine Heights.



Willett's Home, circa 1882

Now most of the folks who staked out a homestead claim were young, strong and energetic and they were helped by their spouse and perhaps a brood of children to improve the land and grow food for the family. But Willett was not your typical homesteader. No, this determined settler, who was without spouse or children, did not fit the classic image of a pioneer who would move across the country to stake out and develop a ranch on 160 acres of vacant land. Willett was unique in many unexpected ways, but was successful nonetheless in proving up the land and becoming deeply involved in community affairs. So our history mystery this month is: What was Willett's full name and what made Willett such an unlikely homesteader?