

Early Public Lands Surveyors in the Northwest

John W. Meldrum

By William W. and Jeanne E. Glenn

The survey of the public lands in Oregon and Washington was conducted from 1851 through 1909 by US. deputy surveyors on a contract basis. Today's surveyors who retrace and resurvey these lines surveyed under the contract system come to know those early surveyors primarily by their surveying records and marks left in the field.

I am one of those surveyors.

For the most part, little is known about the contract surveyor's origin, family and non-surveying interests.

My interest in the early surveyor began when I found my first "original" comer in 1950 while working under Thomas A. Tillman as a surveying aid for the Bureau of Land Management. My interest continued to grow when I became a cadastral surveyor performing dependent resurveys and directing afield party of my own. Later as chief branch of cadastral surveys, I met and talked with many surveyors who expressed an interest in knowing more about those hale and hardy individuals who left the footsteps we follow.

Now that I am retired, I and my wife have begun to research the background of the contract surveyor We would like to share with you in the following article and others in subsequent issues of this magazine some of our discoveries about these surveyors' "other side".

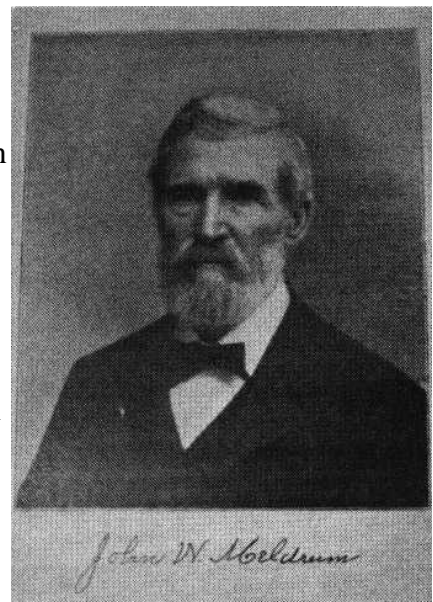
--William W. Glenn

John W. Meldrum was born near Burlington, Iowa, December 17, 1839. His parents were John and Susanna Meldrum. His grandfather, William W. Meldrum, was of Scotch-Irish descent and settled in Kentucky in 1804. Later he moved to a farm near Carrollton, Illinois, where he lived the remainder of his life. John W.'s father, John, was born in Shelby County, Kentucky, in March 1808, and was a stone mason and builder.

In 1845 John and Susanna Meldrum and their four children joined a number of friends in a wagon train travelling to the Oregon Territory. They started from Council Bluffs, Iowa, early in April. Following the Platte and Green river route, they arrived in Oregon City in October.

The family spent their first winter in a small house about 50 yards from the west end of a suspension bridge, built under the direction of Dr. John McLoughlin, across the Willamette river below the Oregon City falls to the island sawmill. In 1850 the Meldrums moved to a claim near Ilwaco, Washington.

John W. Meldrum attended a primitive log schoolhouse; but as he grew older he did much reading and also learned a great deal by association with others and close observation.



After assisting his father in clearing the land in Ilwaco, he returned to Oregon City in about 1856. He taught school, for 2 years read law, and worked in the mines of Idaho and eastern Oregon for several years.

About the time of the close of the Civil war, he turned his attention to surveying. At various times during a period covering 30 years he was a US deputy surveyor working in Oregon. However, most of his service as a deputy surveyor occurred in a 20-year timeframe beginning in 1866. In those 20 years he held at least 16 contracts and, in just five of those contracts, surveyed over 1,500 miles of line, primarily in eastern Oregon.

Probably the biggest influence in Meldrum's life, drawing him into a surveying career, was David P. Thompson. Thompson became Meldrum's brother-in-law when he married Mary R. Meldrum in 1861. By the late 1850s and early 1860s Thompson was well established as a US deputy surveyor. Thompson was awarded contract number 106 on August 16, 1864, with the field work being executed in 1865. This contract included the survey of the Deschutes Guide Meridian between Ranges 17 and 18 East in Townships 14 through 20 South, and between Ranges 10 and 11 East, in Townships 21 through 25 South. John Meldrum worked as a chainman on this survey.

By 1866 Meldrum was performing surveys as a deputy surveyor on contract number 115 held jointly with David P. Thompson and B. J. Pengra. This contract area located in present day Klamath county called for many townships of work, with Meldrum surveying 12 townships. Contract number 116 was awarded to Meldrum only on December 12, 1866, and called for surveys in 12 townships in Douglas and Coos counties.

Meldrum's activity during the next 20 years was working most on contracts awarded in his name, although he did have some joint contracts with Thompson, Pengra or John McClung.

Contract number 125, surveyed in the winter of 1868-69, found him in the western foothills of the Cascade mountain range in Clackamas county. Contract number 166 dated January 10, 1872, called for surveys in four townships bordered by the Pacific Ocean in Tillamook and present day Lincoln counties. Two years later Meldrum, under contract number 204, was surveying townships bordering on the Snake River in present day northern Malheur county. Subsequent contracts called for many townships which for the most part were located in southeastern Oregon, in the Malheur Lake/Steens Mountain area.

While executing surveys a few miles northwest of Steens Mountain under contract number 275, in 1877, Meldrum gave a bearing to the home of a soon to be famous cattle rancher, Peter French. Meldrum's field notes for the west boundary of section 6, T 32 S, R 32 1/2 E, state "--drove charred stake and raised a mound of earth as per instructions for 1/4 section corner. From this corner Peter French's house bears N 78 E." And from the general description, "one settler, Peter French is living in NW 1/4 of section 6." The field returns are silent about any meeting or discussion between Meldrum and French, but it is difficult to imagine French not offering shelter or assistance to surveyors working in that remote and thinly populated area.

Meldrum, like many US deputy surveyors, practiced nepotism and served as survey instructor to field assistants. In 1869 Meldrum's 17-year-old brother Henry worked as his chainman and, by 1872, was serving as compassman. Henry then went on to have public land survey contracts of his own. John Meldrum also hired his nephew, Rufus Moore, to work on field parties. Moore

served as compassman in 1877. He, too, became a US deputy surveyor. In 1896, Meldrum surveyed the subdivision line of T 25 S, R 9 W. Working as chainman on that survey was Edward E Heydon, who in 1897 became a US deputy surveyor with his own contract.

Most of the public land surveys in Oregon were surveyed by deputies using solar compasses. Meldrum was one of these surveyors. On April 14, 1882, as was the requirement before starting a survey, he presented his solar compass to Surveyor General James C. Tolman, for examination on the meridian in Portland. The surveyor general reported "John W. Meldrum presented an improved Burt's patent solar compass No. 4982, made by William J. Young and Son, Philadelphia, Pa. Placed upon the meridian, it was found to be slightly in error in both latitude and declination arcs. It was taken to the shop and the errors corrected and the compass accurately adjusted to read latitude 45°30' north when again set on the meridian, giving a magnetic variation of 22°15' east. In other particulars was found in proper order and approved. Deputy's chains made to conform to office standard." Meldrum held two contracts in 1882, and the lines may very well have been determined through the use of this instrument.

Meldrum's surveying provided a remarkable opportunity to become acquainted with the country. He was thought to have a more comprehensive knowledge of the conditions pertaining to that part of the northwest during its formative stage than most.

In 1888 Meldrum was elected Clackamas county surveyor, and in 1890 he became county judge and served as chairman of the board of county commissioners.

At this time the county roads were in poor condition all year except in the summer. Meldrum realized no permanent improvement could ever come under the labor tax system of working the roads then being used. (This was a poll or head tax for raising funds for roads. In 1844 the tax was 50 cents each for all male settlers south of the Columbia River. By the 1850s the tax had increased to \$1. If the men personally could not work out the tax, they hired others to work it for them.) Meldrum devoted his energies to abolish that system and substitute the money tax system in his county. To bring this change about, it was necessary to have the Oregon City charter changed, as it provided for the use of all the money collected by taxes in the city for road improvement to be spent inside the city limits. In 1892 the change came about with the help of a new commissioner, Richard Scott of Milwaukie, whose ideas on road building coincided with those of Judge Meldrum. Although there was considerable opposition to this new system, the improvement in the county roads soon was evident; and many first opposed to the idea soon voiced their appreciation. Later, other counties copied the change made in Clackamas county.

In 1898 Meldrum served for ten months as special agent for the general land office, examining surveys in Nevada and Wyoming.

In 1902 he again was elected Clackamas county surveyor.

John W. Meldrum and Georgiana Pope (a native of Oregon City and a niece of Governor Abernethy) were married in Oregon City on September 25, 1872. They had three children: Charles E.; Eva, a high school teacher; and David Thompson. David worked as chainman for his father on public land surveys and served seven terms as Clackamas county surveyor between 1921 and 1948.

In January 1871 Meldrum bought the northern half of Peter M. Rinearson's donation land claim on the east bank of the Willamette river. In 1909 he subdivided a portion of his property for the townsite of Meldrum on the Oregon City car line, ten miles from Portland. For his home, he kept 50 acres on the river ½ mile below the mouth of the Clackamas river. The town of Meldrum did not come to be. However, his name continues on in the area once reserved for his home. There is a Meldrum Bar (on the right bank of the Willamette River, Meldrum Bar State Park, Meldrum Bar Park Road, and Meldrum Street.

Meldrum was a member and served as officer in the International Order of Odd Fellows, and Ancient Order of United Workmen. He was a member and served on the board of trustees for the Methodist church. A republican, he was a delegate at large from Oregon to the national convention at St. Louis which nominated William McKinley for president. Meldrum was a member of the Pioneer Society and Oregon Historical Society, with interest in pioneer days in Oregon.

John W. Meldrum died in September 1919.

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