

The Deardorffs: The First Settlers in Happy Valley

By Mark Hurlburt

Although the City of Happy Valley did not incorporate until 1965, the settlement of the valley began long before then, when the Deardorff family claimed hundreds of valley acreage as donation land claims in 1851. Christian Deardorff, of German ancestry, was born in Virginia on January 15, 1805. He was the first of thirteen children born to John and Catharine Deardorff. His future wife, Matilda Landers, was born in Virginia on August 31, 1802 to Christian and Elizabeth Landers. Christian and Matilda married in early 1824 in Indiana where they had the first of their six children, John Martindell, who was born on October 10th of that year. While in Indiana, Christian worked as a farmer and a miller.¹ The family next lived in Illinois before going overland from Iowa in 1850 to the Oregon Territory in a train of 30 wagons.²



Christian and Matilda Deardorff

Courtesy: Clackamas County Historical Society

After arriving in Oregon, the Deardorffs were among thousands of other emigrants who took advantage of the 1850 Donation Land Claim Act, created by Congress to grant 320 acres to an individual and 640 acres to a married couple as a way of encouraging American settlement in the newly created U.S. Territory of Oregon. In 1851, Christian and Matilda settled on 640 acres in Clackamas County between a cinder cone that would later be named Mount Scott and a knoll now known as Scouters' Mountain. As they were the first to settle there, the area became known as the Deardorff Valley, Deardorff Settlement and Christilla Valley, a combination of Christian (Chris) and Matilda (Tilla). Once they settled, Christian continued his trade as a farmer. As other emigrants joined the Deardorffs and settled in and nearby the valley, the area became a farming community. John went to Salem and Milwaukie in search of employment and at Oregon City he found lodging and an occupation in splitting rails.³ In October 1851, John claimed 320 acres next to his parents' claim in the valley.



The land claims of Christian and John M. Deardorff with present-day roads
 Clackamas County Historical Society

The following year an unknown man who had travelled the Oregon Trail with the Deardorffs passed away and needed to be laid to rest somewhere. John donated a small part in the eastern side of his land claim for the man to be buried and the site became a cemetery.⁴ Located on Scouters' Mountain and known as the Christilla Pioneer Cemetery, this is where Christian (d. 1884), Matilda (d. 1891) and other Deardorff family members would be buried. In 1854, John married Rachel Ingram, a native of Illinois whose father received a donation land claim to the northeast of Christian Deardorff's claim. Together they would have three sons, John Bennett, William Albert and James Henry, and a daughter who died in infancy.⁵ In 1858, the family built the famous Deardorff Barn on John's dairy farm, which stood until 1997 when it was torn down to make way for the Happy Valley Heights subdivision.⁶ The barn was built in a Vernacular style with hewn and mortised timbers fastened together with pegs and the siding attached using square nails.



Deardorff Barn, 1989

Photo by Bud Unruh

As part of his occupation as a farmer, John M. would make a weekly trip into Portland with his horse and buggy to sell produce from the farm.⁷ Among the produce grown on the farm were rhubarb, grains and apples, which was condensed into cider and then into vinegar from the farm's cider mill.⁸ Like his father, William Albert made regular deliveries of produce to Portland by horse and buggy. With only a steep, muddy road over Mount Scott as the way out of the valley, William and another local resident, C.W. Gay, petitioned county commissioners in 1898 to have a new county road surveyed and constructed going north to Foster Road.⁹



John and Rachel Deardorff and their sons

Courtesy: The Deardorff family

John Bennett worked as one of the axe men in the survey and laying out of the road that was a joint effort by both Multnomah and Clackamas County. Today, the road on the Clackamas side is known as 132nd Avenue and on the Multnomah side is known as Deardorff Road. For a time the children of the valley went to Rock Creek or Sunnyside for school until 1892 when a small, one-room schoolhouse opened on an acre of land donated to the county from John M. Deardorff's land claim.¹⁰ John Bennett, who was the school district's clerk, got a large bell made to be placed in the steeple.¹¹ This bell continued on when the schoolhouse was replaced by a larger one in 1917 on the same site, which was added on to over the decades to keep pace with the valley's population.¹² The Deardorff bell currently resides outside the present-day Happy Valley Elementary and Middle Schools on Southeast King Road located on the same site of the original school. John M. Deardorff, co-founder of the settlement that would become the City of Happy Valley, died in 1902 and was buried in the cemetery on Scouters' Mountain. As the decades of the 20th century passed, the fertile, agricultural land first cultivated by the Deardorffs and other early settlers were broken up and sold in smaller real estate sales and the farming culture slowly passed away and the valley area transitioned into a suburban residential community.

Mark Hurlburt is a lifelong Happy Valley resident and the volunteer librarian in the Wilmer Gardner Research Library at the Museum of the Oregon Territory.

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