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Seattle to Portland: Tenino & the Story of Ezra Meeker

This is the fourth part of a series that follows the [Group Health Seattle to Portland Bicycle Classic](#) along its route, and explores the history and transformation of the Pacific Northwest through the communities and stops along the way. See [here](#) for part 3.

At the intersection of Sussex Avenue and Sheridan Street in Tenino, a small stone stands erect on the edge of a vacant lot, with the words "Old Oregon Trail 1845-53" etched in it. Many Oregon Trail markers exist, of course, many laid at the time the trail was blazed, others—like this one—laid later to commemorate the pioneers. But this one in Tenino happens to be special: This was the first one laid by [Ezra Meeker](#).



Meeker was one of the more exceptional Washingtonians of the 19th (and 20th, as it happens) century. Born on December 29, 1830, in Huntsville, Ohio, Meeker brought his family west on the Trail in 1852. In 1862 he settled in what would become Puyallup and began growing hops for brewing. He became quite wealthy, and his house, the [Meeker Mansion](#), is today a museum. Completed in 1890 after three years of work, the house's origins lie in a trip the millionaire Meekers took to England in the 1880s, when Mrs. Eliza Jane Meeker was introduced to Queen Victoria, and, in the words of the mansion's website, "became smitten with some of the finer things in life."

But Ezra Meeker, who lived to the age of 97 and did so much that his life qualifies as several normal ones, is most remembered today for his work to preserve the Oregon Trail.

On January 29, 1906, the 76-year-old Meeker set out in a covered wagon, pulled by two oxen, Dave and Dandy, to take the Oregon Trail in reverse. Along the way, he laid Oregon Trail markers, the first of which is the one in Tenino, [installed on February 21, 1906](#).

In his book *The Busy Life of Eight-Five Years of Ezra Meeker* (a free PDF download is available [here](#)), Meeker recalls the event thusly:

A red-letter day; drove over to the stone quarry and hauled monument over to site, where workmen followed and put same in place. This monument was donated by the Tenino Quarry Company and is inscribed, 'Old Oregon Trail, 1845-53.' At 2 o'clock the stores were closed, the school children in a body came over and nearly the whole population turned out to the dedication

of the first monument on the Trail. Lectured in the evening to a good house—had splendid vocal music. Receipts \$16.00.

Meeker was raising money to continue his journey, and by June had come up with the brilliant idea of getting William Randolph Hearst to help. With Hearst newspapers breathlessly following the story, thousands started turning out to Meeker's installations of Oregon Trail markers, while historical societies and private clubs started having their own installed across the country.

After a controversial trip through New York City (he rode his wagon down Fifth Avenue), Meeker made his way to Washington, D.C., and, on November 29, 1907, was introduced to President Teddy Roosevelt and argued his case for a historical project to preserve the memory of the Oregon Trail. Explaining his deeply felt concern for preserving the memory of the Trail some years later in his autobiography, Meeker wrote:

The ox is passing; in fact, has passed. Like the old-time spinning-wheel and the hand loom, that are only to be seen as mementos of the past, or the quaint old cobbler's bench with its hand-made pots on the crane in the chimney corner; like the fast vanishing of the old-time men and women of sixty years or more ago—all are passing, to be laid aside for the new ways, and the new actors on the scenes of life... The difference between a civilized and an untutored people lies in the application of these experiences; while the one builds upon the foundations of the past, which engenders hope and ambition for the future, the other has no past, nor aspirations for the future.

Despite the eloquence Old Man Meeker could summon in defense of his cause, aid was not forthcoming. Congress considered—and rejected—\$50,000 to fund a historical project.



Not to be daunted, Meeker continued on in his efforts. In 1910 he repeated his trip by ox-drawn wagon; in 1916 by automobile; and in 1924, at the age of 94, he flew a WWI-era plane from Vancouver to Dayton, Ohio, took a turn as a grandee in a parade alongside Orville Wright, and then flew on to D.C., presenting President Calvin Coolidge with his newest plan: to build a national highway in honor of the Oregon Trail. Instead, Coolidge passed legislation

enabling the limited mint of special \$.50 coins in honor of the Trail, the sale of which could be used to fund more markers.

Meeker's plan for a national highway system was progressive in the sense that it was years ahead of its time. It would take decades of intense lobbying efforts by the automotive industry (at the time of Meeker's death in 1928, Henry Ford himself was underwriting his plan to drive across the country again), to say nothing of dirty, underhanded tactics to defeat rail as both local and long-distance transportation. The 1933–34 World's Fair in Chicago, the "[Century of Progress](#)," was a major public relations victory for the automotive industry, but still it wasn't until the [Interstate Highway System](#) was approved by Congress in 1956 that anything like Meeker's original, far less ambitious, project was initiated. And of course, the auto industry's victory over mass transportation has burdened us with the environmental destruction that today inspires many of the STP riders who are starting to cruise through Tenino, as we stand at Meeker's first marker, several blocks away.

The history Meeker sought to celebrate is today more complicated than he ever could have imagined. His comment about a "civilized" people smacks of white ethnocentrism, and his characterization of the pioneers as "heroic men and women who fought a veritable battle—a battle of peace, to be sure, yet as brave a battle as any fought by those who faced a canon's mouth" is suspect at best, when seen from the perspective of the Native American tribes who were decimated by disease, dispossessed, murdered, robbed, and duped into giving up their land for the white pioneers.

And the "new ways, and the new actors on the scenes of life" Meeker mentioned in his 1916 book have long since transformed and now threaten to erase the world he so loved: the small towns and farming communities that the pioneers built. Not too far down the street from his marker sits the Old Tenino Bank, opened the same year he placed the stone, today basically abandoned. The old main street through Tenino is lined with antique stores, which gives us the distinct impression that this is the last stand of the old ways here, as the last of the original families sell off their trinkets, their *history*, one by one to passing tourists and deal-seeking city folk, until even that source of revenue fails them, and these people, only a few generations removed from the pioneers of Meeker's time, pull up stakes again and move, the world they built having erased them from it.

But by 10:30 a.m., we knew been away from the STP riders for too long, and hopped in the car to head just a little further south to Centralia, and the half-way point of the Seattle to Portland bicycle ride.

Tomorrow: Centralia

Photos of the Tenino Oregon Trail Marker and the Old Tenino Bank by K. Patora; image of Ezra Meek taken from a plate in his autobiography.

By [Jeremy M. Barker](#)