

Peter French: Ranches and Homesteads in Eastern Oregon

Peter French (April 30, 1849 - December 26, 1897) was a rancher in the western United States in the late 1800s. The community of Frenchglen, Oregon was partially named for him.

Early life

Peter French was born John William French in Missouri on April 30, 1849. In 1850, his father moved the family to Colusa County, California to begin a small ranch. Finding there wasn't enough room for small ranch operations due to Spanish land grants, French's father uprooted his family once again and traveled north to the Sacramento Valley. French's father began a sheep ranch there, which became very successful; however, as French grew older, he found that the work was not exciting or challenging enough for him.



French moved southward to Jacinto, California where he met and accepted employment as a horse breaker with Dr. Hugh James Glenn, a wealthy stockman and wheat baron. French was a quick learner and good worker, and in a few months he was promoted to foreman. The Spanish-speaking *vaqueros* liked and respected French, as he learned their language. At some point in his employment with Dr. Glenn, French assumed the name "Peter". French married Glenn's daughter, Ella, in 1883. They divorced in 1891.

Dr. Glenn had expanded his assets as widely as possible in the area, and began to scout new areas for his profitable markets. In 1872, he sent French to Oregon with 1,200 head of Shorthorn cattle, a handful of *vaqueros*, and a Chinese cook. He ended up in southeastern Oregon to find vast grasslands amid the arid high desert.

Upon his arrival in the Catlow Valley, French and his men came upon a poor prospector named Porter. Porter sold his small herd of cattle to French, and with the sale of his cattle went his squatter's rights to the west side of the Steens Mountain and his "P" brand. As French ventured further, he found the Blitzen Valley, where the Donner und Blitzen River snaked northward 40 miles to Malheur Lake. This became his favorite spot, where he set up his base camp. He built shelters for his herd, line cabins, and bunkhouses for his men. Thus, the P Ranch was born.

The Cattle King

After several years, French's small cattle operation had expanded, helped in large part by Dr. Glenn as his financier. The P Ranch had become the headquarters for the French-Glenn Livestock Company. He and his men built fences, drained marshlands and irrigated large areas of land, broke hundreds of horses and mules, and cut and stacked native hay. French's empire expanded to include the Diamond Valley, the Blitzen Valley, and the Catlow Valley. The land encompasses approximately 160,000 to 200,000 acres (650 to 800 km²). A shrewd businessman, French took advantage of the Swamp and Overflow Act, which allowed marshland to be purchased at \$1.25 an acre. He would build dams to flood areas, buy the land under the Swamp Act at the reduced price, then remove the dams to return the land to its original state. French would also direct his employees and others to file homestead claims that he would then purchase. His attempts at seizing more and more land even included fencing lands in the public domain.

Fall of the King

The year 1878 became the most violent for French, as in June of that year the native Paiute and Bannock (both closely associated with the Shoshone tribes) population at the base of the Steens Mountain swooped down upon the P Ranch, but not before a messenger could warn French of the impending attack. French and all but one of his men were able to escape. The attacks continued throughout the summer. The Paiutes burned buildings and homes, ran off cattle and horses, and at least once shot French's horse out from under him. At one point, it is unclear when, French even accompanied the U.S. 1st Cavalry Regiment to guide the Army through the area.

In the 1880s and 1890s, stockmen and smaller farmers fought over land and water rights. Aggression over such rights and French's large spread of land drew a certain loathing toward him.

French arrived back home from a business trip on Christmas Day in 1897 bearing gifts he had purchased for his wife, children and cowhands. His crew chief fell ill in the night, and French was to take the on the responsibilities of trail boss the next morning.

On December 26, 1897, French opened the gate to a sagebrush field to let his cattle through. As he remounted his horse, Ed Oliver, a man with whom French had had a previous boundary spat, rode his horse at full speed straight at French. Oliver's horse collided with French's, and as Oliver charged again, French struck him over the head with a willow whip. Oliver produced a revolver from his waistband and fired one shot. The bullet struck French in the head and killed him instantly. Oliver, fearing retribution from French's men, sped off.

Another lost battle

Harney County Sheriff Andrew John McKinnon arrested Oliver the next day, Oliver still wearing the weapon that had taken French's life. French's brother, Burt, filed an indictment for murder; however, the charge was dropped the day before Oliver's trial was to begin. Harney County District Attorney Charles W. Parfish wouldn't let it drop so easily, though, and filed a new indictment for manslaughter, acting on the belief that he would stand a better chance of pinning down the lesser charge.

The trial began on May 19, 1898, with members of French's crew testifying that Oliver had shot French from behind as he rode away from Oliver. Lionel R. Webster, attorney for Oliver, maintained that Oliver had shot French in self-defense, having feared for his life. Grasping at straws, Webster put his client on the stand. Oliver testified that French beat him with the willow whip, and screamed "I'll kill you!" as he reached for a gun. French's men had earlier testified, however, that French was not armed.

Jurors only took three hours in deliberation before returning the verdict: Not Guilty. French had finally lost his last battle with the homesteaders in Harney County.

John William "Peter" French was buried in Red Bluff, California next to the graves of his father and mother at the Oak Hill Cemetery.

Source: Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_French)