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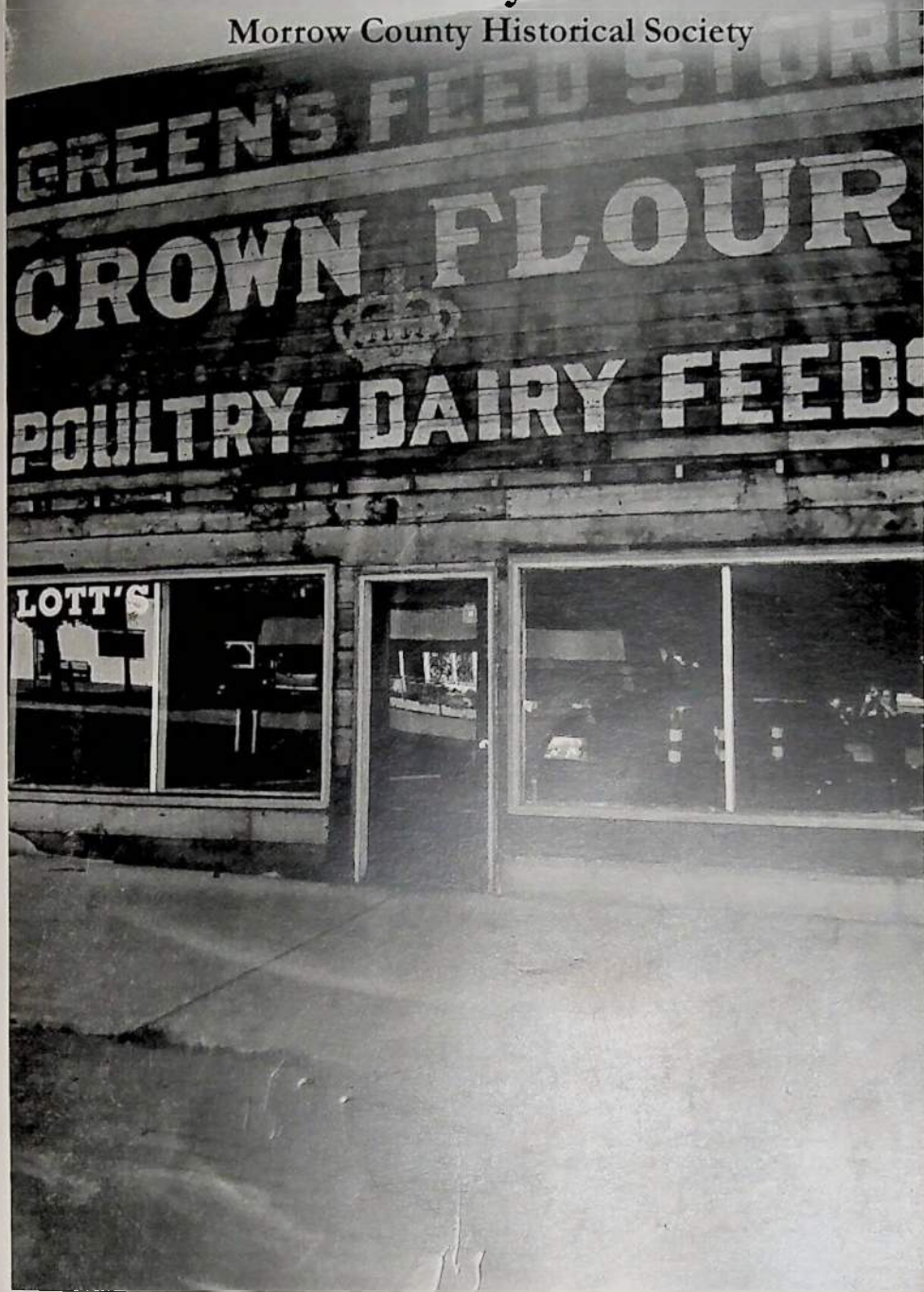


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Charles Cunningham

Oregon Sheep King

*By Roger and Dennis Doherty
(originally written only to share with their families)*



Charles Cunningham

Charles Cunningham rose from orphan in Ireland to Morrow and Umatilla Counties' largest sheepman by 1905. He was often called Oregon's Sheep King for his flocks of 21,000 head. Born in 1846, in Tuam, County Galway, during Ireland's Great Potato Famine, Cunningham made his way to New York City at age eighteen. On his arrival in 1864, Union recruiters were haunting New York's port for fresh enlistments, and in about a month, Cunningham was in the service of the Union Navy. He was assigned as a messenger boy on the battleship USS Galina, part of the union fleet of nineteen vessels engaged in the Battle of Mobile Bay, August 5, 1864. Cunningham was severely wounded, spent two months on a hospital ship, and after being mustered out, made his way to California, where he worked for four years.

Cunningham relocated to Pendleton, Oregon, in 1869 and entered into the sheep business working for Major W. H. Barnhart, one of the leading wool growers of the area. He saved

his money until he was able, in 1873, with Jacob Frazer, another of the successful sheepmen of the area, to purchase a flock of sheep. Soon after, they purchased the Hewlet and McDonald Ranch. In 1876, Cunningham filed a homestead claim on Big Butter Creek, beginning a thirty-year enterprise in this area on the eastern border of what would become Morrow County in 1885 and the western border of Umatilla County. The next year, 1877, Cunningham purchased a ranch here, which became his Morrow County Base.

In Cunningham's life, he amassed wealth but also experienced many setbacks and tragedies, the early ones being the death of his parents at a young age, and then being wounded in the service of his new country.



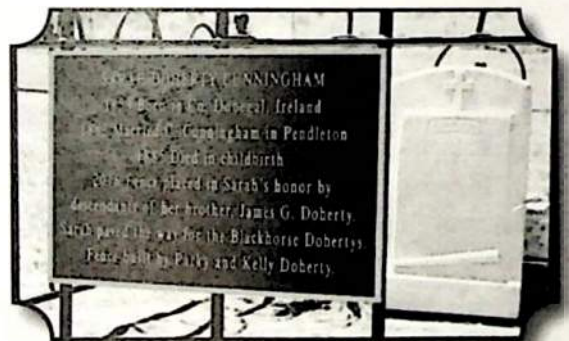
**Charles Cunningham
& his daughter**

His first tragic experience in Oregon was the Bannock War (1878), during which he lost over five thousand dollars' worth of stock.

An event of very good fortune for Cunningham was the arrival in the States of Sarah Doherty in 1880. Doherty was the eldest child of Francis and Catherine Grant Doherty, from the peninsula of Inishowen, Ireland's northern most tip. She traveled to the ranch of her

cousin, Catherine Nelson, a neighbor of Cunningham's, further up Butter Creek. Charlie Cunningham and Sarah Doherty were married in Pendleton in May, 1883. Again, in a bittersweet turn, their first child, a son, died at birth in March, 1884. In February of the next year, their daughter was born, but Sarah died in childbirth, another tragedy. Mother and son are buried at Vinson, on Butter Creek.

At almost the same time (October, 1883), Sarah Doherty Cunningham's family



**Sarah Doherty Cunningham
plaque placed at her gravesite in
2016**

(her mother, two brothers and her sister) arrived in the Butter Creek area from Ireland. Her brother James G. Doherty married Catherine Doherty of Carndonagh, Ireland, and eventually settled in Blackhorse Canyon north of Heppner. Her sister, Mary, married Michael Kenney, settling in the Milk Canyon area of eastern Morrow County.

Cunningham married a second time, in 1893, to Catherine Flannagan, formerly of Indiana, and then living in Pendleton. At this time, Cunningham moved his home into Pendleton. To this union was born two children, Cecilia and Charles, Jr. Cecilia Cunningham married Lee Shannon, and their descendants constitute a small diaspora and are Charles Cunningham's legacy to the future. Cunningham's son, Charles, died at Fort Lewis, Washington, in 1918, a victim of the great Spanish Flu epidemic.

In June, 1895, a Portland Oregonian headline read, "Two Big Ranch Fires. Charles Cunningham Loses a Large Amount of Property. Sixteen Hundred Sheep Destroyed. Both His Big Butter Creek and Pilot Rock Places Burned – Loss Will Reach \$20,000, With Insurance of \$12,500." Cunningham was at home in Pendleton when the fires occurred. Two men were seen hurriedly leaving the Pilot Rock ranch and in a few moments, flames burst forth in a dozen places. The Butter Creek fire was similar. The next night arsonists struck again. This time Cunningham was camped at the Pilot Rock ranch, and as flames again shot up, he and his crew set out to pursue the arsonists, only to lose the trail one mile north toward Pendleton. A great dispute then arose between Cunningham and his insurance company regarding liability for the property lost. Another newspaper headline states, "Work of Oregon Tramps." But the Oregonian's reporter speculated "One (reason) is that the extensive landed holdings of Mr. Cunningham have caused jealousy on the part of some others. Mr. Cunningham owns about 14,000 acres of deeded land and has under lease two or three times as much. A great deal of this is fenced, and it is impossible to encroach. It is said by others that there are a few horse owners who have had ranges unfit for graze after the sheep have gone over them, and these have secured revenge. Still another allegation is that men formerly employed by Mr. Cunningham have grudges against him." Such were the thoughts of some at the time. In any event, Cunningham suffered major loses, and it took him some time to recover. By 1902, however, Cunningham was again offering for sale "2,000 Yearling and 400 Two-Year-Old Rams, Including 500 Head of Large Shropshires."

Cunningham remained the Sheep King of Eastern Oregon and his flocks continued to increase in size, remaining among the highest quality sheep in the west. His commercial empire included ".... Twenty-one thousand head of sheep, giving him an annual wool clip of two hundred and fifty thousand pounds, while his annual income from this immense establishment is over seventy thousand dollars" His Rambouillet and Delaine sheep were famous, as was his reputation world-wide as a sheep breeder. He sold rams to other sheepmen; he paid shearers a two-cent premium per head because their heavier fleeces took more work; he made yearly trips to San Francisco and other ports to buy new lots of Merino rams to keep his stock infused with new blood and to maintain his reputation for high-grade stock.



**View of home ranch
Cunningham Sheep Co.**

The year 1905 marked a zenith for Charles Cunningham. In February he sold his estimated clip, described as the largest and finest clip in the state, to the Union Woolen Mills for 17 cents per pound. But his fortunes quickly came under threat. From 1900 to 1905 Oregon experienced a major land fraud scandal related to transfer of title to timberlands. Homestead claims were fraudulently filed and then transferred. Very large amounts of land were involved. On a much smaller scale, but nevertheless inappropriate case, Cunningham found himself embroiled in the scandal. Wanting to take title to some land within his holdings, Cunningham skirted the edge of legality. He and six others were

arrested on accusations of conspiracy to commit land fraud by having his accomplices claim the subject lands as homesteads. Following drawn-out court proceedings in which the government land agent in La Grande was accused of soliciting bribes to abet these title transfers, Cunningham ultimately pleaded guilty to the charge of fraud. He was fined and paid \$5,000 and also agreed to pay fines of \$200 each for his accomplices.

In November, 1905, Cunningham changed his business model. He agreed to sell his empire, including all land holdings except for his home, and all of the sheep owned by him to J. M. Burgess, J. M. Keeney, and R. A. Kelsay. These purchasers incorporated the Cunningham Sheep & Land Company. The company again changed hands in 1920, to Fred Falconer, and then in 1933 to Donald Cameron and Mac Hoke. Hoke's descendants, the Corey and Levy families operate the enterprise today.

Charles Cunningham did not fade into comfortable retirement, however. He turned his attention to the nearby area of Pasco, Washington. This area, including Kennewick and Richland, and known as the Tri-Cities, was a transportation hub. In addition, government supported irrigation projects for surrounding dry lands was just taking off. Cunningham set out to create a first-class hotel in Pasco. In 1908 he purchased a tract of land near the railroad station. 1909 saw the construction of the three-story brick Cunningham Hotel. Simultaneously he invested in and became the major stockholder in the Union Gap Irrigation Company, and remained involved in its operations until his death on September 22, 1912. He never lost his Irish identity. In 1911, being pestered by a newspaper man in Yakima who asked where he was from, he snapped, "Ireland, of course. Where the hell did you suppose I was born!"

By accident of geography, Charles Cunningham came to be associated with both Morrow County and Umatilla County, and later Franklin County in Washington. His impact of our area was great. Dozens of solid men who helped to settle Morrow County passed through his benevolent employ in those early years. Among them Patrick Doherty of Vinson; James G. and Bernard Doherty of Blackhorse; Bernard Doherty of Sand Hollow; and a host of others.

Cunningham's arrival here was an accident. He had no relatives or friends here. But his being here and his marriage to Sarah Doherty became a magnet that drew many others to Morrow County.

Sarah's story is about what she did in her short life - and for the Blackhorse Dohertys, about her legacy. Just as Catherine Doherty Nelson had been the magnet that drew Sarah, Sarah was the magnet that drew her mother after her father died, and her sister, Mary, and her brothers, James Grant and Bernard F. ("Lame Barney"), to Big Butter Creek.

Sarah's mother helped care for Sarah's daughter Sarah Marie after Sarah's death. Sarah's sister married Michael Kenny on December 16, 1884, and her legacy is captured in the 1984 A Bit of Irish Stew. Her two brothers worked for Charles Cunningham, but in 1891, they moved to Blackhorse Canyon, near Lexington, Oregon.

Bernard F. did not marry, and oral history is that he and James G. had agreed that the Blackhorse Canyon farm could support only one family. That was James G.

James G. married a Catherine Doherty, who was also born in County Donegal, on March 7, 1872, and emigrated when sixteen years old. James and Catherine Doherty Doherty had thirteen children, expanding the Blackhorse Doherty family line (Mary, Sarah, Nora, Ann, Margaret, Tina, Francis, Eugene, Bernard, Gertrude, Helen, Paul, and Betty). The eleven who married then had children of their own - plus or minus, forty-four of them.

Ironically, James G. saved the Blackhorse farm by dying unexpectedly, per oral history. It was the Great Depression. The family was struggling to keep the farm intact, but a mortgage foreclosure seemed imminent. On February 11, 1933, as James G. was waiting for a ride into town to meet with the banker, he died of a heart attack. The heart attack that took him triggered the insurance policy that saved the farm. His wife, stayed on the farm and, with the help of the children, kept the Blackhorse farm going.

To paraphrase but broaden Roger: Many of us today should reflect on the confluence of history and events that put Charles Cunningham and Sarah Doherty and our ancestors like them in positions to come to this country and to plant their feet firmly on the soil of this area.