

# County's birth preceeded Oregon statehood

First county seat was Sailor Diggings, later called Waldo

By Stacy D. Stumbo and Patti Richter of the Daily Courier

Since President Thomas Jefferson dispatched an exploring party led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark in 1804 to investigate the newly acquired Louisiana Territory, the idea of Oregon country mesmerized adventurers and people who were simply looking for a new start.

Emigrants were lured to the new frontier by promises of free land and opportunities to farm, fish and hunt. About 100 Euro-American settlers were the first to travel the dangerous Oregon Trail in 1842. Two years later, more than 3,000 emigrants followed, and by 1850, an estimated 9,000 people had crossed the trail.

A provisional government in Oregon was formed on May 2, 1843, in Champoeg, near present-day Salem. Its members petitioned Congress asking for naval yards, mail service, land grants, military protection and territorial status. On Aug. 14, 1848, President James Polk signed the Organic Act, creating the Oregon Territory. Mexican War hero Joseph Lane was appointed its first governor.

The Territorial Legislature created Jackson County, with Jacksonville as the county seat, in 1852. The original Jackson County included most of what is now Jackson, Josephine, Curry and Klamath counties.

Josephine County was created on Jan. 22, 1856, from a portion of Jackson County. Named for Josephine Rollins Ort, the first white woman to settle in Southern Oregon, it was the 19th, and last, county created before Oregon became a state in 1859.

Sailor Diggings, later called Waldo, became the first county seat. Its courthouse was a log cabin that was purchased from settler James Hendershott for \$100. County officers were elected in June 1856, and included three county commissioners, a sheriff, auditor, treasurer, probate judge, and coroner. The U.S. district court held its first session at Sailor Diggings in 1856.

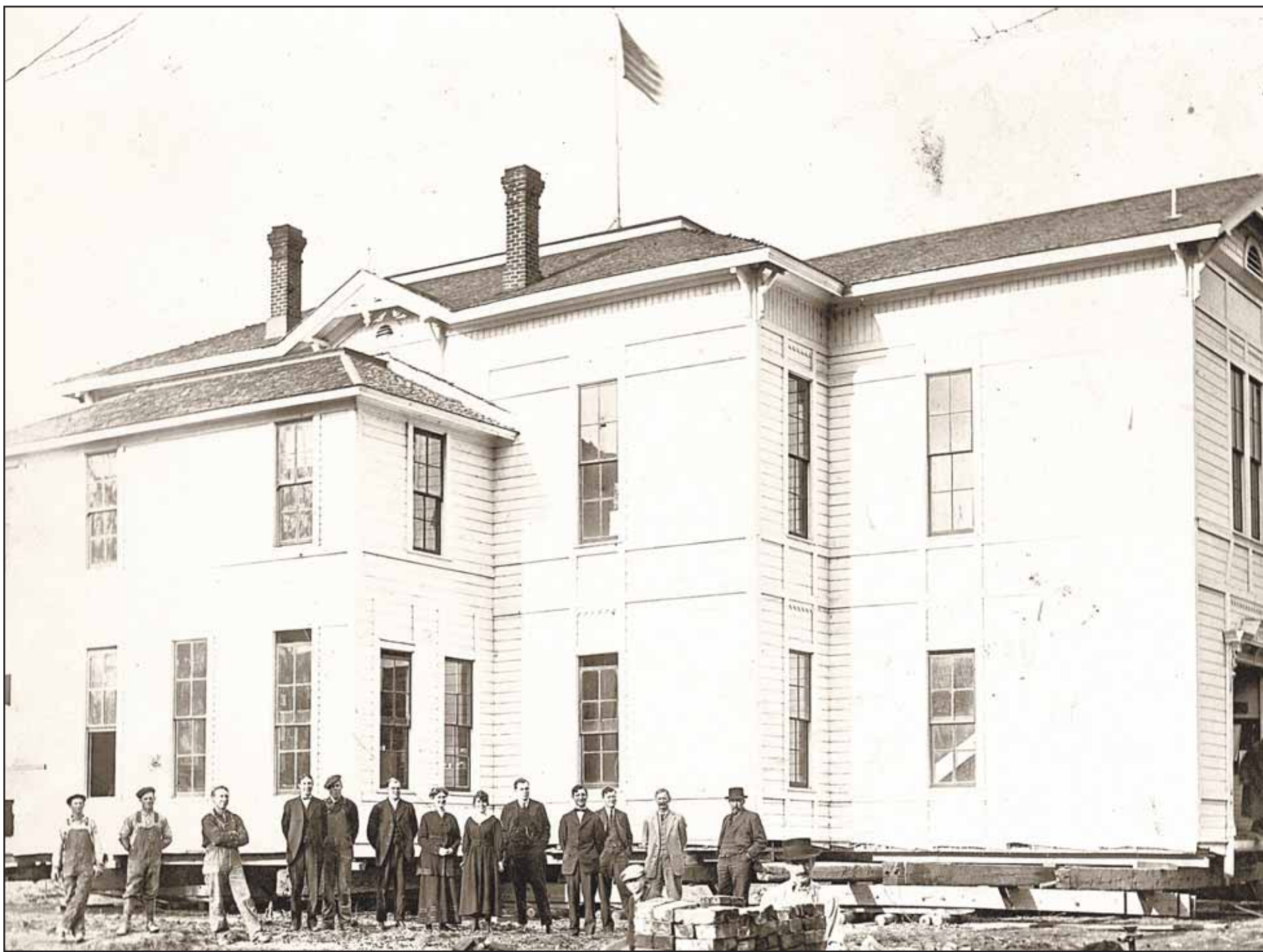
By 1857, the population center shifted north to the Illinois Valley and to Kerbyville, a town that had been founded earlier that year by James Kerby, and the county seat moved.

By 1873, the Oregon Business Directory and State Gazetteer said the county's population was about 1,500 and despite its "rugged aspect ... there are some fine valleys possessing a rich alluvial soil well adapted to grains and fruits." There were only seven "towns" listed in the Gazetteer: Althouse, Kerbyville, Leland, Slate Creek, Waldo, Williamsburg and Wolf Creek.

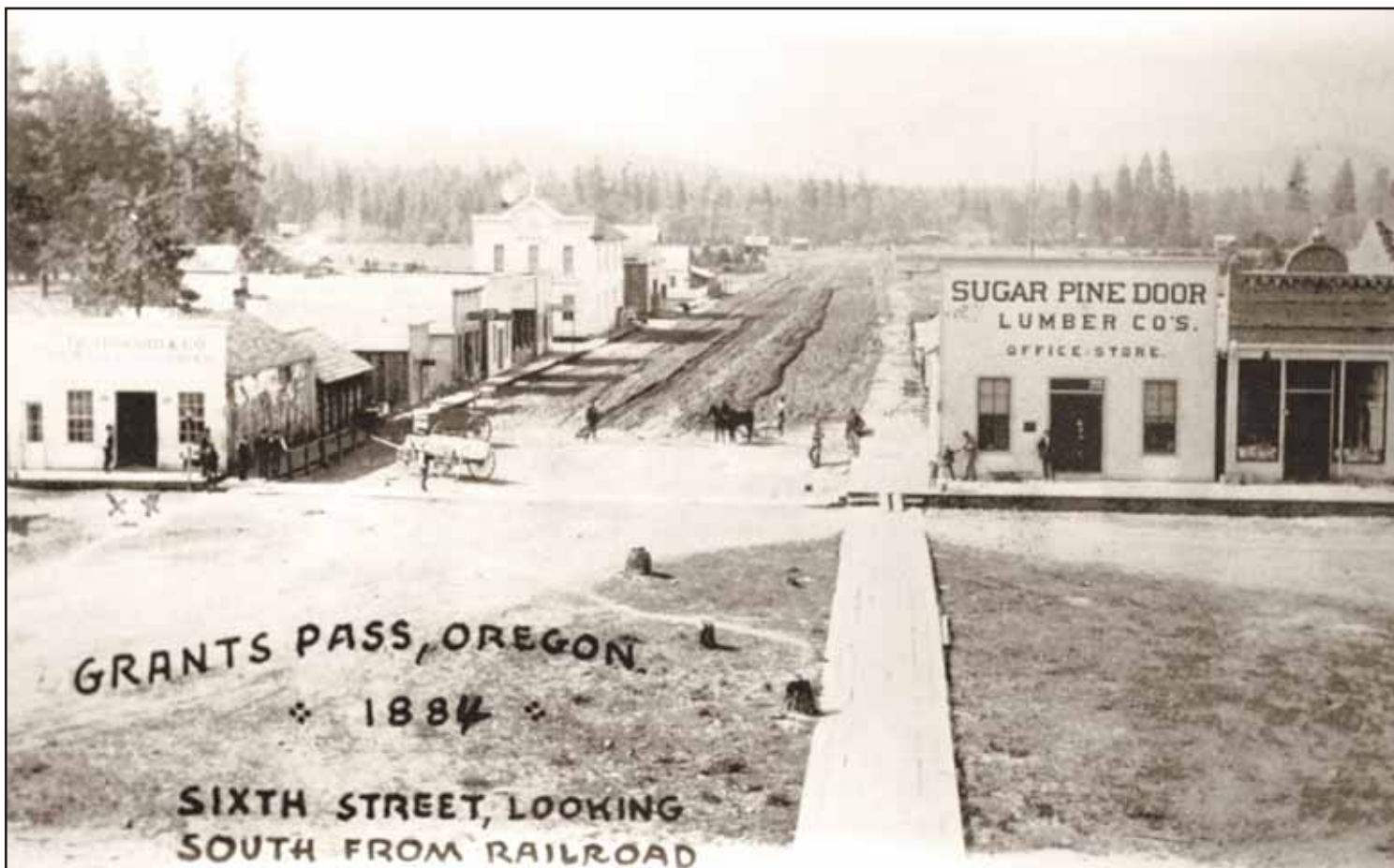
Most commercial activity centered on gold mining and the supply of provisions to miners. There were a few hotels and stores at the time, but the Gazetteer hinted that gold wasn't the area's only asset.

It read, "If the means of communication were better, this county would furnish many excellent farms which could be worked for profit."

A small village called



The first courthouse in Grants Pass was built in 1886 with lumber from the Sugar Pine Door & Lumber Co., historians believe.



The Sugar Pine Door & Lumber Co. is thought to be the second building erected in Grants Pass. It was built by Henry B. Miller, whose sawmill became one of the largest in the state, employing 300 people.

Perkinsville, later to become Grants Pass, was little more than a stagecoach stop in the 1860s, but the coming of the Oregon and California Railroad in 1883 changed every-

thing. The area of Grants Pass was found in 1854 by Orson Gilbert who settled on a donation claim on the land that would become the thriving community more than three

decades later. It wasn't until 1865 that Grants Pass was named. Josephine County had a population of 785 at the time.

Once the railroad was in place, businesses to serve the train's passengers and those who were making their home in the new community began cropping up. There were hotels, stores, saloons and other businesses setting up shop in wood buildings along

Front Street, now known as G Street.

Grants Pass soon became a center for shipping and government. Within five years of the railroad's arrival, the city's population nearly doubled from 2,510 residents to more than 4,800.

The first building in town was built by J.W. Howard at the corner of Southeast Sixth and G streets. A second build-

ing, the Sugar Pine Door & Lumber Co., was built soon after by Henry B. Miller, on the southwest corner of the two streets.

Miller's sawmill flourished, becoming one of the largest in the state. It was believed to employ 300 people and covered nearly 10 acres in the downtown area.

The mill utilized a horse-powered steam engine and

could produce 25,000 feet of lumber a day.

Miller also helped develop several of the more prominent buildings in Grants Pass including the Opera House in 1889, the Josephine Hotel in 1893 and the Josephine Hotel Annex in 1905, and the First National Bank of Southern Oregon.

Historians believe the first courthouse in Grants Pass was built in 1886 with lumber from Miller's mill.

But some of the buildings didn't last long. A couple of fires, one in 1895 and the other 1899, destroyed much of the town's business district including stores, hotels and saloons. During the Jan. 13, 1895 fire, several saloon owners tried to save some of their liquor by wheeling it into the streets. It was promptly stolen by those who gathered to watch the fires.

After the fires, developers turned to a local brick manufacturer to supply the exteriors of the buildings but the manufacturers had a hard time keeping up with demand.

Miller also spearheaded the movement to have Grants Pass become the county seat of Josephine County in 1886. He also appropriated \$7,000 from the state to build the first bridge that spanned the Rogue River, just downstream from the current site of Caveman Bridge.

Over time, the miners and transients who had made Grants Pass their home moved on and were replaced by farmers. That caused a change in downtown and several saloons were replaced by grocery stores and dry goods shops.

From the pages of the **Courier**

**APRIL 3, 1885**

"There will be a concert at the school house on Saturday evening, April 12, given by the scholars and teachers for the benefit of the Sunday School. Let every one come and help the good cause. Admission ten cents."

**Josephine County facts and figures**

- **FOUNDED:** Jan. 22, 1856
- **SIZE:** Consists of 1,642 square miles
- **CITIES:** Cave Junction and Grants Pass (county seat)
- **COUNTY SEAT:** First county seat was Waldo, also known as Sailor Diggings, before the county was officially formed; Kerby became the second county seat in 1857; and Grants Pass was elected the third — and final — county seat in 1886.
- **OTHER COMMUNITIES:** Galice, Golden, Greenback, Holland, Hugo, Kerby, Merlin, Murphy, O'Brien, Placer, Pleasant Valley, Selma, Sunny Valley, Taklima, Waldo, Wilderville, Williams, Wolf Creek and Wonder
- **POPULATION:** 8,000 (1894); 81,618 (2008)

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