





# SUNRISE AT POCATELLO

*Dr. Minnie Howard, Ezra Meeker  
and the Oregon Trail Half Dollar*

The proponents of establishing a historic site traveled a hard road.

**I**N THE EARLY 1920S, Dr. Minnie Howard and her husband, William, joined forces with aging pioneer Ezra Meeker to promote recognition of the Oregon Trail and the sale of commemorative half dollars. This is their story.

## **Minnie Howard & Ezra Meeker**

Minnie Frances Hayden was born on August 23, 1872, in Memphis, Missouri. When she was about 14 years old, her family moved to a farm near Larned, Kansas. She later taught in rural classrooms while attending Central Normal College in Great Bend, Kansas. In 1894 Minnie married William Forrest Howard in Larned and, in 1899, earned a medical degree from the University of Kansas. Howard practiced medicine for several years with



her husband.

In 1902 the couple moved to Pocatello, Idaho. About four years later, Minnie gave up active practice to tend to her growing family and be involved in community affairs. Over the next 50 years, she and her husband were leading lights of Pocatello's civic life. (This article is based on her papers, which reside at Idaho State University.)

Fort Hall, located near what later became Pocatello, was a major point on the Oregon Trail. Pioneer Ezra Meeker visited the post in 1852 on



his journey west from Iowa to Portland, Oregon, by ox cart with his wife and infant son to publicize the trail. By the time he returned to the Oregon Trail in 1906 (at the age of 75), Fort Hall's site was unknown. The Howards and others helped him locate it in 1916. They wanted to build a granite obelisk there, de-

▲ **DR. MINNIE HOWARD AND EZRA MEEKER** joined forces to honor Fort Hall, Idaho, a stop on the Oregon Trail.

PHOTOS: WWW.NIH.GOV (HOWARD), WIKICOMMONS.ORG (MEEKER) & ROBERT B. KELLEY

*“On the reverse, I would have a representation accurately pictured of the covered wagon, driven by Ezra Meeker when he came across the plains.”*



▲ **THE HISTORIC OREGON TRAIL** connected the Missouri River to valleys in Oregon. The route was traveled by about 400,000 settlers, ranchers, farmers, miners and businessmen and their families.

signed by New York City architect Palmer Rogers. However, the site was on an Indian reservation, and the Bureau of Reclamation wanted to inundate it for a reservoir. These two issues would ultimately defeat Minnie Howard's efforts to gain the site.

Nevertheless, Howard continued to fight for the Fort Hall memorial. In October 1925, she consulted with others to seek financing for the monument. Pocatello insurance salesman F.C. McGowan took a Stone Mountain half dollar from his pocket and said, "Yes. Coinage. Like this!" He suggested that the coin depict the obelisk on one side, proposing, "On the reverse, I would have a representation accurately pictured of the covered wagon, driven by Ezra Meeker when he came across the plains... I am sure this would be a very salabel [sic] coin, that would bring \$1 a piece, in the entire market of the United States."

### **Legislation Passes**

Organizational papers were drawn up for an Idaho nonprofit corporation that would receive the

coins and own the land where the monument would be located. In late October, Meeker passed through Pocatello, where he proposed the founding of the Oregon Trail Memorial Association (OTMA). Meeker suggested that its broad scope would appeal to Congress and that "we could more easily get a bill through Congress to issue a million half dollar coins than for a hundred thousand."

Meeker convinced U.S. Representative John Miller (R-Washington) to introduce the bill for the Oregon Trail half dollar (H.R. 8306) on January 26, 1926. The bill allowed for a record 6 million commemoratives, to be sold to the OTMA at par. Miller and Smith were to work with Idaho Senators William Borah and Frank Gooding to get the bill through as Meeker lobbied legislators. A House Coinage Committee hearing was held on March 3, and Meeker testified in support of the bill, which was endorsed and sent to the full House.

Howard wrote to Meeker on April 2, 1926: "All [here] are delighted with the progress of the bill



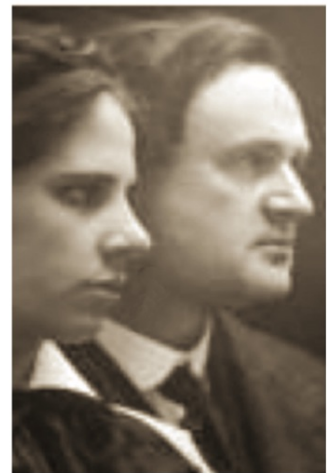
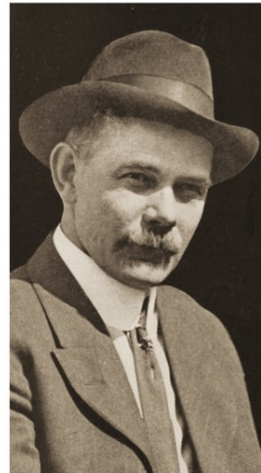
*After meeting with President Calvin Coolidge to secure his support, Meeker was present when the president signed the bill on May 17, 1926.*

in Congress.” On April 5, the bill passed the House of Representatives without opposition. The U.S. Senate scheduled a Banking Committee hearing for April 27, at which Meeker testified. There, proponents had to deal with a letter from U.S. Treasury Secretary Andrew W. Mellon, stating that only commemorative coins of “national importance to all the people” should be struck. In his testimony, Meeker argued that the coin was important. Senator Gooding wrote that “we may have a hard fight to put it over in the Senate but I hope not.”

In New York City, the OTMA Executive Committee considered whether to ask for a medal instead of a coin, an idea suggested by Mellon. By telegram, Minnie Howard urged the committee to back the coin, and it did. The Banking Committee reported the coin bill without recommendation on April 28, 1926. On May 10, the bill passed the Senate unanimously as Meeker watched from the gallery. After meeting with President Calvin Coolidge to secure his support, Meeker was present when the president signed the bill on May 17, 1926. OTMA Secretary Robert Bruce called the bill’s passage “a wonderful tribute to Uncle Ezra.”

### **The Search for a Designer**

On May 19, “a preliminary design suggested by Robert Bruce was presented to the [OTMA Exec-



PHOTOS: WHICOMBS (BORGLUM) & NEW YORK STATE MORGAN HORSE SOCIETY

▲ **SCULPTOR GUTZON BORGLUM** (left) asked for \$5,000 and six months to design the Oregon Trail Memorial half dollar. The OTMA committee in charge of the selection refused his demands. Both Laura Gardin Fraser and her husband, James (right), were considered potential designers, with one person noting that Laura “is exceptionally good on oxen, etc.”

utive] Committee and received general approval as to the design of the Covered Wagon on one side and a map showing the route of the Oregon Trail on the other side.” Meeker and Rogers met with Gutzon Borglum, designer of the Stone Mountain Memorial commemorative half dollar. Borglum wanted \$5,000 and six months to make the Oregon Trail piece; the OTMA declined. Meeker and Rogers then met with sculptor Ulric Stonewall Jackson Dunbar, who had played a minor role in the 1892-93 World’s Columbian Exposition half dollar. He requested \$350 to create an Oregon Trail commemorative, but the OTMA felt an artist of national renown was needed.

Sculptor Daniel Chester French was approached, but he was too busy to submit design sketches. Meeker and Rogers then visited the American Numismatic Society, which recommended about six sculptors, including French, and James Earle Fraser and his wife, Laura Gardin Fraser. Meeker and Rogers visited James Fraser, who asked for \$2,500; Meeker haggled him down to \$2,000, with the remaining \$500 considered a donation from the Frasers. James indicated he lacked the time to compose sketches and that the OTMA would have to trust his judgment. For a second time, Meeker visited Fraser’s studio, where, according to Rogers, the pioneering

## **Mabel Murphy’s Idea**

On April 16, 1925, the *Idaho State Journal* ran an editorial entitled “Oregon Trail Covered Wagon Half Dollars.” The piece was written by D.T. Murphy at the instigation of his wife, Mabel Mary. In a 1926 letter, Murphy related that his wife came to him “in a flurry of breathless ecstasy [sic] and excitement and laid before me her thrilling inspiration for the O.T. [Oregon Trail] coin. Her idea came from the precedent established when the [1925] Stone Mountain coin was struck.” The editorial proposed that the commemoratives be made from Idaho silver, and suggested that “nothing would stimulate historical interest like it. It would take a place of honor even higher than the buffalo nickel and be worth 45 cents more in trade. [Treasury] Secretary [Andrew] Mellon ought to fall for that suggestion like a long horn falls for nice green Idaho alfalfa.” Mabel Murphy would not live to see the coin she first proposed; she died of tuberculosis on November 30, 1925.



*“We had quite a time deciding upon the sculptor, and I firmly believe that your telegram, suggesting Mr. Fraser, was the deciding factor.”*

Meeker “also met Mrs. Fraser, and the following arrangement was made: That Mr. Fraser would design one side of the Coin [if hired], and that Mrs. Fraser would design the other side, as she is exceptionally good on oxen, etc.”

James Fraser was unwilling to enter any design competition. Evelyn Longman Bachelder was willing to do the work for \$1,000, but would not submit sketches or enter a competition. Bruce suggested that “Fraser and Mrs. Bachelder seem to be morbidly afraid of competition, and want the work, if possible, outright on their reputation.”

Howard wired Palmer Rogers: “In considering Sculptor for memorial coin do not forget Fraser.” She wrote Meeker: “Oxen and a covered wagon are unlovely, unless the artist can comprehend and feel through the situation that this ox-drawn wagon conveyed the most precious human freight.” French’s work, she argued, did not concentrate on the West: “He may not know or love the meaning of the covered wagon movement. All this is why I suggested Fraser.” (James Fraser was well-known for his works depicting the American West.)

On June 10, Rogers wrote to Howard: “We had quite a time deciding upon the sculptor, and I firmly believe that your telegram, suggesting Mr. Fraser, was the deciding factor.” Rogers wrote again on June 16, stating that “we have selected one of the best sculptors in the country to do the Coin.”

### Finalizing the Design

The OTMA considered a depiction of Meeker with two oxen, based on the pioneer’s appearance at age 75 in 1906, when he traveled the Oregon Trail again. This design received a frosty reception in Pocatello. On May 24, Howard and five

other Idaho OTMA members sent the New York office a telegram, urging instead that a “design of oxen and covered wagon with Ezra Meeker[,]

age twenty-two[,] wife and child gives the historical significance of the Oregon Trail Movement...put the family into the wagon and you will greatly enhance the popularity and salability.”

Rogers wrote that the design for one side of the piece had been definitely settled, with “the Covered Wagon going toward the West into the setting sun and the pioneer walking along side the ox team, with the mother and child in the wagon.” The reverse motif was “discussed in detail” at the OTMA Executive Committee meeting on June 22, and a possible concept featuring a Pony Express rider was deemed “very suitable.” The goal was to have the design ready for the U.S. Mint by August 1, when the Philadelphia Mint reopened after its usual summer closing. Meeker was planning another trip on the Oregon Trail and wanted to peddle the coins.

Howard began a correspondence with Laura Fraser. In her only surviving letter to Fraser, dated July 3, 1926, she wrote that “the Pony Express was a phase of development,” but the 1836 journey of missionaries Marcus and Narcissus Whitman “was the origin of it all,” as

it proved that women could survive, making American settlements possible. Howard proposed that early settlers, male and female, riding tired horses, be depicted on the coin. “I congratulate the Oregon Trail Memorial Association on securing you and your husband to design our coin.”

Laura Fraser did not reply until August 25, by which time she and her husband had created a dramatic depiction of a Native American for the reverse. Fraser wrote, “I delivered the hubs myself to the United States Mint [in Philadelphia]



▲ THE FINAL DESIGN of the Oregon Trail commemorative half dollar featured the desired ox-driven covered wagon on the obverse and a Native American with a bow on the reverse. (The latter was not well received by some.)

PHOTOS: HERITAGE AUCTIONS

*"We were all too optimistic at the start. The coins are not selling and it behooves us to keep out of debt."*

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PHOTO: WIKICOMMONS



▲ A SWEEP OF FIELD AND A BARELY NOTICEABLE MARKER occupy the original site of Fort Hall (1834-56) in Idaho.

yesterday. I think the people at the mint are impressed with the fact that the coins are desired with all possible speed and told me that they would do the best they could do in their power to get them out at the earliest possible time."

Ezra Meeker received the first coin; its whereabouts are unknown. Howard got the second and insisted it be placed at the State Museum in Boise, where it remains. Bruce wrote to Howard on September 24, complaining of "the over-large Indian, and too long bow, entirely obliterating the conception of the route which I was so careful to supply to the Frasers. However, now too late!" When Meeker passed through Pocatello, Howard reported that the pioneer often seemed feeble, but his strength returned when he spoke at banks, which he urged to sell the half dollars.

On December 18, 1926, Gutzon Borglum wrote to Howard and suggested that the OTMA seek commemoratives honoring seven states associated with the Oregon or Mormon Trails, with mintages between 50,000 and 100,000. Borglum also proposed a common, covered-wagon motif for one side of the coin, and individual state designs on the other. He recommended that early strikings (as well as the last pieces, struck with worn-out dies) be sold for fund-raising, suggesting, "Coin collectors would almost absorb your small issues for separate states." Nothing came of his idea.

### Meeker's Last Stand

The OTMA concluded the year 1926 with Meeker's 96th birthday celebration on December 29, at which he was given 96 Oregon Trail half dollars. All was not harmonious at the OTMA, however. In a letter to Minnie Howard at the end of May, Meeker railed against board spending and warned, "We were all too optimistic at the start. The coins are not selling and it behooves us to keep out of debt."

The Stone Mountain effort had by then failed due to (among other things) overspending by the organizing committee, and Meeker opposed advertising campaigns, fearing they would bankrupt the OTMA. Meeker occupied himself by giving speeches to New York-area groups and selling coins. He reported 9,000 coins "sent out" in one week in April 1927, a rate that if sustained, would result in 6 million coins being sold in some 13 years, sometime around his 110th birthday.

In early 1928, Howard and her husband caused a resolution to be passed by the OTMA Idaho unit requesting to purchase 200,000 coins at 50 cents each, with the profits to be applied directly to the Fort Hall project. Meeker objected. "This proposition to set out 200,000 coins under the independent control of another combination would be the beginning of the end of this Association." The matter apparently was put on hold until Meeker could meet with Howard during another trip along the trail, planned for 1928.

Meeker left New York City for the last time on September 3. He fell ill en route, discontinued his trip and went on to Seattle by train. His health worsened, and he died on December 3, less than a month before his 98th birthday.

### A New Leader

New York University Professor Howard Driggs was elected the new president of the OTMA. He and the new board worked to clear the debt of some \$10,000 accumulated under Meeker. Minnie Howard renewed her call for 200,000 coins, a demand she would repeat several times in the 1930s. Driggs was no more willing to allow this than Meeker had been, but the regional OTMA branches were granted some coins to sell, with the profits designated for local projects.

In December 1930, Howard wrote that the Idaho unit was constructing an Oregon Trail memorial at the old ford across the Portneuf River in Pocatello, and planned to ask for more specimens



*"I will carry on, this special task of representing the interests of Old Fort Hall having been especially delegated to me by Ezra Meeker."*



PHOTO: WIKICOMMONS

▲ **OTMA PRESIDENT** Howard Driggs in his final years.

to finance a park around the memorial. More than 100 memorials, bearing plaques with the covered wagon design from the commemorative half dollar, were erected from Missouri to Washington in the early 1930s, mostly by local affiliates of the OTMA, and financed through the promotion and sale of the half dollars.

On August 5, 1939, Congress withdrew permission for all commemorative se-

ries authorized before March of that year, including the Oregon Trail piece. Driggs apparently did not tell the OTMA membership of the 1939 legislation. In 1940, at Driggs' instigation, the organization passed a resolution to merge the group into the newly formed American Pioneer Trails Association (APTA), which was of broader scope. The decision was bitterly opposed by Howard and her Idaho unit, which refused to change its name.

With the legislative authorization withdrawn, Driggs no longer needed to retain the name "Oregon Trail Memorial Association" for the purpose of requesting more coins pursuant to the 1926 legislation. By not changing the name, Minnie Howard may have hoped to take over that legislative permission, and wrote to the U.S. Mint asking how many coins of the 6 million remained to be issued. Mint Director Nellie Tayloe Ross replied on December 27, 1940, stating that 5,735,750 pieces were available. She added that additional coins could not be struck because of the 1939 act, which she quoted. She also noted that of the 264,250 coins delivered to the OTMA, 61,244 had been returned for melting.

In 1947, then approaching her 75th birthday, Minnie Howard prevailed on Idaho Senator Henry Dworshak to introduce legislation to allow newly struck Oregon Trail half dollars for the Idaho unit to finance the Fort Hall project. The bill was introduced on February 26. That same day, President Harry Truman issued a statement opposing

"numerous" coin bills introduced in Congress. The Banking Committee responded unfavorably to Dworshak's bill, and Acting U.S. Treasury Secretary E.H. Foley weighed in with the department's views.

Foley went further than voicing general opposition, detailing the history of the OTMA's association with the U.S. Treasury. "Coins were ordered to be minted and left in the mints. For example, 50,000 were ordered on April 6, 1928 bearing the 1928 date, and [remained there] on September 4, 1930," he said. Foley revealed that the OTMA had, in 1931, negotiated with a coin dealer (likely Scott Stamp & Coin Company, which later was the coins' major distributor) to take some of the pieces on the condition that the rest be melted, but the U.S. Treasury wanted assurances that no more specimens would be ordered, which the OTMA was not willing to give.

Foley provided the mintages, never more than 18,000 in a year in the 1930s. "If this coin bill is revived...it will be possible for this association to order a small number of coins each year until the remaining 5¾ million authorized have been minted" (at that pace, in several thousand years). The bill failed.

Howard continued to try to obtain the original site of Fort Hall, though the local tribe had indicated its opposition in the 1930s. In 1947 she managed to secure passage of a bill authorizing a memorial on the reservation, but the legislation had no force without a corresponding appropriation, which did not pass. Howard continued her advocacy despite the death of her husband in 1948, writing to a congressman the following year: "I miss him. But as long as I am able, I will carry on this special task of representing the interests of Old Fort Hall, having been especially delegated to me by Ezra Meeker." She was still doing so in 1958 at age 86.

In 1963 the City of Pocatello opened a replica (designed as a tourist attraction in a park) of Fort Hall. If Minnie Howard's health allowed her to be aware of this in the years preceding her death in 1965, 10 days after her 93rd birthday, I doubt it satisfied her.

With the efforts in the 1940s, the Oregon Trail half dollar, having seen its sunrise in Pocatello, met its sunset there as well. ■