



EMIGRANT TRAILS HALL OF FAME

OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION



William Wayne Morrison

William Wayne Morrison, a prominent Oregon Trail historian, was born in Adlai, West Virginia and grew up in Zanesville, Ohio where he developed his interest in history early in his teenage years.

In 1919 Morrison began a 48-year career with the Union Pacific Railroad as a telegrapher in Potter, Nebraska. He later worked as a passenger and freight agent at other Union Pacific offices in Nebraska and Wyoming. His interest in history consumed most of his free time. His wife, Mildred, and their daughter, Wanda, frequently accompanied him on his trips. In 1952 he wrote: Our hobby is walking along the Oregon Trail, searching out wayside graves and story spots, and if possible, to contact living descendants of the pioneers having to do with them and getting the story, such as where did they come from, where were they going, and how did they come to be buried there?

He undertook meticulous research to document his findings, wrote articles for historical publications and newspapers, and initiated projects for preservation of graves and historic sites. His extensive collection of maps, photographs, diaries, transcripts, research notes, artifacts, memorabilia and other materials relating to emigration on the overland trails is now archived at the University of Wyoming American Heritage Center.

- **Historian**
- **Born 1898, Adlai, West Virginia**
- **Died 1977, Cheyenne, Wyoming**

One of the notable projects Morrison initiated was the restoration of the Rock Creek Church in Clackamas County, Oregon. Built in 1852, it was one of the first three Methodist churches in Oregon. Services were held there until the 1920s. Morrison first visited the church in 1949 and was disturbed by its deterioration. He called public attention to the need for restoration, helped raise money for the project and spoke at its dedication in 1951.

His 1949 trip was the outcome of his interest in the story of Mary Homsley, a pioneer who had died along the Oregon Trail in Wyoming in 1852. Her grave near Fort Laramie had been discovered by a horseback rider in 1925 beneath a fragment of a headstone with the inscription "Mary E. Homsley, died June 10/52. Age 28." A story was published in the *Portland Oregonian* with the headline "Who was Mary Homsley?" in the hope of finding descendants of those in her party who had completed the journey. Descendants in Oregon who read the article revealed that Mary's husband, Benjamin Homsley was buried in the Rock Creek Church cemetery.

Morrison became interested in learning more about the family in the 1940s and sent out many letters hoping to locate living relatives. He received a reply from Hattie Taylor White, a granddaughter, and corresponded with her for about five years before the 1949 trip. Sadly, she died two days before his arrival, and they never met. However, the trip led to his interest in restoration of the church and in 1975 it was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

In the Foreword to her book, *The Oregon Trail*, Dr. Margaret Long wrote, "Various organizations have placed Oregon Trail monuments and have restored and protected grave stones along the old trail. W. W. Morrison of Cheyenne, Wyoming has done more than anyone else in recording forgotten graves."