Circle the Wagons, Boys-It’s Tourist Season
Almo, Idaho

*Opposite the post office in the little town of Alamo stands a beautiful slab of stone carved into the shape of the state of Idaho. It memorializes a horrifying incident in the history of the West:*

_Dedicated to the memory of those who lost their lives in a horrible Indian massacre, 1861. 300 immigrants west bound. Only 5 escaped. –Erected by S & D of Idaho Pioneers, 1938._

Source: Loewen, James, Lies Across America, 1999 (pgs. 89-93)

The local grocery store sells a pamphlet giving more details about this extraordinary event. Not only was it the most important incident in Almo’s past, it was by far the most brutal massacre of white pioneers in the all history of the West. At Almo, more European Americans died than in Custer’s Last Stand at the Little Bighorn and the Fetterman Massacre in Wyoming combined!

The only trouble is, it never happened.

Proving that an event did not occur can be difficult. Regarding the Almo massacre, however based on “over forty years of research”, historian Brigham Madsen makes a compelling case. First, Madsen shows that the earliest mention of the massacre was in 1927 - 66 years after 1861! He notes that other much smaller hostile incidents won extensive newspaper coverage when they occurred. “Even the slightest Native American disturbance along the road received immediate notice from these various western newspapers,” wrote Madsen. “The lack of any reference to an affair at Alamo Creek can only mean that there was no ‘Almo Massacre’.”

Next Madsen confirms that the records of the Indian Service, the War Department, and state and territorial bureaucracies reveal no mention of the event. “A massacre involving the deaths of 294 emigrants would have endangered a massive amount of material,” he argues. “There is none.”

Then Madsen looks into the origin of the 1927 account. Its author, Charles Walgamott, cited “an old trapper who gave us a detailed account” when Walgamott had visited Almo some fifty years earlier. And in 1927 Walgamott talked with a “Mr. W. M. E. Johnston, whose family bought the land in 1887,” when it “still bore evidence of the hard-fought battle.” Johnston also claimed to have heard a version of the massacre “from an old Indian,” which Walgamott incorporated into his story.

According to Walgamott’s account, the Indians surrounded the train of more than sixty wagons, causing the pioneers to circle their wagons in traditional Hollywood style. The emigrants settled in for a siege, digging a trench under each wagon and throwing dirt to the outside. Meanwhile they tried to dig a well, but found no water. “Men who undertook to bring water from the creek were shot down. Occasional shots from the Indians killed or badly wounded some white man, woman, or child, which threw the members of the besieged party into greater confusion and grief.”

Walgamott added details to construct a scene out of Dante’s _Inferno_: “The excitement grew intense as panic-stricken horses in their struggles broke their fastenings and ran frantically around the enclosure, while others in their attempt to break loose were snorting, rearing, and trampling the earth from which rose great columns of dust through which frantic women and children darted hither and thither in their aimless attempt for relief. This, with the constant yelling of the Indians and howling of their dogs, made a scene too wild and awful to contemplate.”
As with any good massacre, there must be survivors to tell the story, and Walgamott told of six. First came a young couple: “It was on the fourth night that the guide employed by the train gave up all hopes and planned his escape. He was accompanied by a young woman who had displayed great courage and marksmanship. Under the protection of darkness they crawled through the sagebrush, making their way to the mountain.” The other four made for even better copy. “In the after part of the same night one man and two women, one with a nursing baby, secretly stole from camp, crawling for miles on their hands and knee. The mother of the child, in her anguish and endeavor to keep in the company with the others as they crawled through the brush, was compelled to take the garments of the child in her teeth and carry it in that manner.” Later the four “lived on rosebuds and roots” until rescued by Mormons, who then found all the rest slain. The Mormons buried these unfortunates “in the wells which they had dug.”

Madsen finds it hard to believe that in three or four days, while under siege, these people dug wells deep enough to accommodate 294 bodies. He also notes that no one has ever been able to come up with any information about the 300 emigrants before the attack or the six survivors afterward.

With all these inconsistencies in the “old trapper/old Indian” account, how did it get memorialized on the landscape? It fit with white Americans’ stereotype of “savage Indians,” of course. Historian John D. Unruh Jr. painstakingly compared emigrants’ diaries with their letters to friends and found that throughout the Western migration, pioneers embellished and invented hostile Indians for the folks back East. Unruh also found a rash of fictional massacre reports in newspapers in the 1850s.

By the 1930s these stories resonated with the familiar American archetype of whooping Indians racing their horses around the ring of wagons. Of course, Indians rarely circled like that—such action would merely expose them and their horses to danger. In fact, the “tradition” of circling Indians does not begin in the West, but in 1883 in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, where Indians had to circle because they were riding in a circus ring! Buffalo Bill became the biggest show business act in the world; by 1893 fifty imitators were touring the United States.

Hollywood picked up the tradition, and the rest was history—or, rather, myth. One third of all Hollywood movies made before 1970 were western novelist Larry McMurtry put it, “Thanks largely to the movies, the lies about the West are more potent than the truths.”

Madsen researched the specific genesis of this marker. Two Idaho newspaper editors, striving to put this part of Idaho on the map, concocted an “Exploration Day” set for October 17, 1938. They wanted tourists to visit the “City of Rocks,” an interesting nearby formation of rock pinnacle, which they were trying to get designated as a national monument. They were also trying to interest government officials in diverting Snake River water to a huge-irrigation project. The Almo Massacre marker was a way to draw visitors.

When “Exploration Day” dawned, a mix of rain and snow dampened enthusiasm for the Almo Massacre marker dedication, which ended up being attended mainly by its donors, the Sons and Daughters of Idaho Pioneers. Over time however, even though the event never happened, the massacre marker won a place in the hearts of Almo citizens. A few years ago the Idaho State Historical Society tried to remove it, but “was met with firm resistance” according to Larry Jones, state historian. “Apparently, the majority of the fifty or so permanent residents still consider the marker to be accurate.” The historical society placed its removal attempt on hold.

According to the Hollywood myth, now cast in stone in Almo, Native Americans were the foremost obstacle pioneers faced. Actually, though Natives did defend their homes and lands against intruders, on the whole they proved more help than hindrance to westering white pioneers. Peter Boag studied the diaries of emigrants who passed through this part of Idaho, scene of more conflicts between Native residents and newcomers than any other part of the Oregon Trail. He found 105 references to Native Americans in 32 journals written between 1835 and 1850. Boag classified 41 as clearly positive, 35 as neutral (“saw an Indian”), and 29 as negative. The unfriendly comments were mostly disparaging physical descriptions of Native Americans or reactions to annoying trade relations. Only two diaries referred to actual or rumored attacks or nearly violent encounters. Instead, journals tell how Indians offered salmon in trade and helped whites ford rivers.

Relations did worsen over time. As more newcomers came they became a burden to the Natives, disrupting their hunting patterns and threatening their sovereignty. The trade nexus [network] wore thin: later in the emigration, whites had less need for Indian guides or interpreters or even for Indian foods. Native Americans meanwhile had grown more dependent upon European technology, leading them to beg and even steal to get it. European American became more careless in their dealings with the Native Americans: they refused to pay tributes, for example, and “physically abused the Indians,” in Boag’s words. Even so, according to Unruh, throughout the entire West between 1842 and 1859, of more than 400,000 pioneers crossing the plains, fewer than 400, less than .1 percent, were killed by American Indians. And no one massacred anyone in Almo.