

PERRY WRIGHT

What follows is a story relayed by Roland Cheek of his encounter with Perry Wright—a mountain man living in the North Umpqua area.¹⁴⁰

“...Naturally, as a young man just beginning to explore and hunt the North Umpqua country, I’d heard of Perry Wright but never dreamed I’d get a chance to meet him. Nor did I dream if I should, that I’d actually get a chance to talk to the famous mountain man.

It was 1959 and there were two of us out deer hunting. We’d paused to eat lunch with our backs to a fallen tree when a big, old man ambled by on the trail. He stopped to talk, acting for all the world like we were old friends he’d chanced upon. Then I discovered he was Perry Wright and my talking days were over, while my listening days were just beginning.

That chance encounter led to dozens of other visits. And my knowledge of the country and former days blossomed. One of Perry’s foremost clients [on the North Umpqua] was the famed Western writer, Zane Grey.

“I thought Zane Grey fished the Rogue,” I said one day as Perry began a tale featuring the cantankerous writer.

“No,” Perry said. “He wrote about fishing the Rogue, but he actually fished the North Umpqua. I myself asked him one time why he never wrote about the Umpqua. He told me he wasn’t going to ruin the Umpqua by writing about it, like he did the Rogue...”

EARLIER PIONEERS

Yet a few hardy souls had preceded famous early fishermen like Mott, Wright and Grey. A recluse named “Umpqua” Vic O’Byrne had established a camp a few miles upstream from Steamboat, across the river from an old, abandoned fish hatchery built in 1920. The spot was known as Hatchery Ford. It was one of the few places where a pack train of horses and mules could cross the river. O’Byrne built a cabin and fished for salmon and steelhead in grand solitude. He was reputed to have been a military man before he “took to the wilds.” He later drowned in what some considered mysterious circumstances, since his glasses and other personal effects were found laid out neatly on his cabin table after his body was recovered from the river downstream.⁴⁸