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FAMOUS OREGON RANCH  
NOW A WATERFOWL REFUGE

Another area, unprofitable for agriculture, is being restored to the uses of wildlife in this country. The Bureau of Biological Survey has recently completed the acquisition of the famous P-Ranch in Harney County, Oregon. The 64,717-acre area, now known as the Blitzen River Migratory Bird Refuge, not only will be important as a sanctuary, but will also be of strategic importance in insuring a water supply for the Lake Malheur Bird Refuge, which adjoins it on the north.

Federal acquisition of these lands marks the return to public ownership of a historic area. Bounded on the east by the Steens Mountains, on the west by the slopes rising to the Hart Mountain, and on the south also by high land, the valley is traversed by the Donner und Blitzen River. This stream rises in the Steen Mountains and flows west into the south end of the basin, then north into Lake Malheur. As the name suggests, the area is famous for thunder-storms, which are in fact the principal source of the rainfall. Back in the days of 1864, during the Snake War with the Indians, the troops of Col. Geo. B. Surrey crossed the stream during one of these thunder-storms and then gave it the German name for thunder and lightning.

In subsequent years it has been the scene, not only of the resounding storms of the atmosphere, but also has known a "donner und blitzen" created by

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the stormy early settlers. During the years about 1870 amidst gunfights and constant struggle among various exploiters of the public domain, Peter French, locally-famous, established his claims to this valley with its Teutonic name and established the P-Ranch which he made the capital of a vast cattle empire. With all the daring and shrewdness that characterized the early land settlers, French not only acquired available public lands, but also consolidated his holdings by taking over those of his rivals. He continued this enlargement of his kingdom up until the time of his death, December 26, 1897, when he was shot by a rival landowner along a boundary fence.

Since the death of the founder of the empire, the P-Ranch has been owned and managed by livestock corporations. The Blitzen River has been dammed to water the vast bottomlands, giant dredges creating ditches for the purpose, and dams being erected at intervals to control the water supply. It has at times constituted one of the greatest hay ranches in the region, and until the recent long-continued drought, was considered a profitable agricultural enterprise. With the sudden decrease in rainfall, however, and with overgrazing, the agricultural usefulness of the area has almost disappeared and at the same time the wildlife species dependent upon the Blitzen River's flow have been threatened with disaster. The results extended to Lake Malheur, where this once famous area -- now a Federal refuge -- has been almost completely dried up and rendered useless for a time.

The marshy lands, stretching 35 miles back from Lake Malheur, have always been a favorite breeding ground of migratory waterfowl. Millions of ducks and geese have bred there, and a naturalist of the Biological Survey last May counted 120 species of birds nesting on the area. Among these were 100 pairs of the rare sandhill cranes. Wildlife other than birds that will be benefited includes also beavers, mule deer, antelope, and smaller mammals. About a hundred beavers are known to make their home along the Blitzen River, and forty or fifty antelope have been observed on the area. Smaller numbers of mule deer are present.