

HISTORY OF MALAD VALLEY WELSH FESTIVAL

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Many newer residents of Malad Valley may wonder why the Malad Valley Welsh Festival is held here. And many people may think that if they are not Welsh or have no Welsh ancestry, the Festival has nothing for them. In an effort to preserve the pioneer history of Malad, the Welsh Festival began in 2005 and does offer something for everyone, whether or not you are Welsh!

This history of the Welsh in Malad Valley dates back to the 1860s when many Welsh pioneers settled in Samaria and Malad, perhaps thinking that the Valley reminded them of the green hills of Wales. (They must have come in the spring.)

In the 1840s many Welsh people were converted to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by Dan Jones, the famous missionary who was fulfilling a prophecy given by Joseph Smith, founder and prophet of the Church. The new Church promised a spiritual rebirth for the Welsh people who had been forced to give up many of their beliefs when the English took over their country and coerced the Welsh to worship according to Church of England beliefs. Seeking an opportunity to practice their new religion and adhering to the LDS Church's call to its converts to gather to Zion, hundreds of Welsh converts came to the United States.

Under the direction of Brigham Young, many of the Welsh converts moved West in wagon trains and handcart companies. The Welsh tended to stay together in family groups and so settled in their new western Zion in towns that became heavily Welsh in culture, tradition, and language. Many Welsh families moved north to Willard, Utah, and from there to Samaria, Idaho, in the Malad Valley. Samaria became one of the most solidly Welsh communities settled by LDS pioneers.

The other reason for the Welsh leaving their country and coming to the United States in the 1850s was economic. The English had taken over ownership of most of the mines and iron works that had made Wales prosperous. Miners and iron workers were reduced to eking out a bare living in dangerous jobs with little hope of advancement to management positions. Small farmers were barely able to scratch out a living on tiny farms, and crop failures were common. The Homestead Act of 1862 that promised free land in the American West to anyone who would settle and "prove up" the land was very appealing to all oppressed Europeans.

Even before LDS settlers were homesteading in Samaria, another settlement was developing a few miles north and east in the Malad Valley. In the late 1850s, French trappers had camped along the river and became ill from the water. The unnamed French trappers moved on, but the name “malade” or “sick water” stuck. The anglicized version—“Malad”—became the name of the river, the valley and, by 1864, the city founded on the river. Malad City became a rollicking “gentile” community with many bars and gambling parlors. Two sides of town developed – one populated by religious pioneers from Wales and other European nations and one known for its less desirable activities. Commerce developed rapidly in Malad City as it became a major stop on the freight route between Utah and Montana. When the railroad arrived in Malad Valley and a depot was built in Malad, the population of Malad overtook that of Samaria.

In the 1860s and 1870s, LDS settlers of all nationalities came to the Malad Valley to homestead, work for the railroad, and establish shops. The members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were joined by the Presbyterians, Catholics, and “Josephites” (the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), all of whom built houses of worship. Gradually, the Williamses, Evanses, Joneses, Thomases, Davises, Griffithses, Prices, Jenkinse, Hugheses, Bowens, Edwardses, Morgans, Parrys, Reeces, Rodericks, and other Welsh families scattered throughout Malad Valley from Dairy Creek on the north to Cherry Creek on the south. They were joined by the Swiss (Buehlers and Schwartzes), Germans (Hesses), Scandinavians (Jensens, Christensens, and Sorensens), English (Wards, Kents, Hills), and French (Deschampses and Erramouspes). Most were seeking one or both freedoms – freedom to practice their religion and freedom to own land. In the Malad Valley, they found both and learned to live together in cooperation and peace.

Today, Malad Valley continues to have the largest concentration of persons of Welsh descent per capita of any place outside of Wales. The interest in Wales and all things Welsh has been rekindled in the descendants of those pioneer settlers with the founding of the Malad Valley Welsh Society in 2005.

The 16th annual Malad Valley Welsh Festival will be held June 24-25, 2022, in Malad City Park, downtown Malad and Samaria’s Heritage Park and will provide an opportunity to hear presentations about Welsh heroes, history and culture, listen to Welsh music, and even eat Welsh food before the Chairing of the 2022 Welsh Festival Bard. Kids’ games, wagon rides to historic sites in downtown Malad, readings of original poetry and stories, original art works and music of all types

plus food and craft/gift booths will provide entertainment for everyone, regardless of pioneer ancestry.