

## 1912 Sumpter Disaster

A narrow gauge train struggles to gain speed as it chugs out of the station. Dredges churn and groan. The din is enormous. At the hilltop school, teacher has to speak loud. “What year was the Declaration of Independence signed?”

“1847,” Rafe shouted. He was trying to peer from a high window to watch the train’s steam funnel.

“Wrong,” Miss Gleason mouthed back. No one heard her. Just then, the band on a street below struck up “Founder’s Day”.

“When can we leave?” Carol asked. “We have to dress for the parade. Rafe’s got to decorate the wagon, and we haven’t had lunch yet.”

Miss Gleason sat with head in hands. How was she to teach in this booming town of Sumpter, Oregon. The dredges, the growing mounds of creek gravel, as the company sought pay dirt. The steam train’s daily wailing whistle as it began the heavy haul of gold and timber, headed west, people building houses.

Suddenly there was screaming!! Miss Gleason opened the window. “Fire!” People yelled, ran in wild circles. Someone set up a bucket brigade, others tossed belongings into wagons. Horses pounded barn walls. Something exploded.

“Children, line up. Quickly. We’re heading up the hill. Don’t be afraid. We’ll be ok if we climb high.” There was solemn quiet in the classroom. Students clung to each other as they stumbled out the door. A few held Miss Gleason’s hands. As they climbed, they glanced at flames that shot into the sky. Those who walked backward watched fire eat their town alive.