Indians are tolerated these days as long as they don't assert any rights, by that I mean, claims to stolen aboriginal land or the right to hunt and fish on traditional hunting and fishing grounds. It was only a generation or so ago that it was not safe to be an Indian, or perhaps just as bad, to be an Indian sympathizer.

Such a person was John Beeson. He immigrated to the Rogue Valley in 1853. John and Ann Welborn Beeson came from England about 1828-30 and settled briefly in Ithaca, New York. In 1834 or 1835 he moved his family to La Salle County, Illinois, to try farming. A son, Welborn, was born soon after their arrival.

Tiring of the wind and lack of trees in Illinois, the family decided in 1853 to move to Oregon where they hoped the environment would be more like their native England.

It was during this journey that Beeson first became aware of the plight of the Indians, for he writes; "I left Illinois in March 1853, in route, across the plains, for Oregon; and like many others, anticipated the pleasure of seeing Humanity in its various phases of savage, barbaric, and semi-civilized life".

"We encamped at Havensville, on the Missouri, and waited several days, in order that grass might afford sufficient feed before we ventured beyond the possibility of purchase. It was here that we had our first sight of the Indians; and truly our hearts sickened at the view. There were men and women, with naturally fine forms, and minds capable of development, yet evidently besotted, and sunk below their original barbarism. Tobacco and whiskey and the accumulation of civilized vices, had done their work. Some of them were begging for bread, apparently in great destitution; and surely it would be put a poor return for the lands of which we have deprived them, to devise, and put into operation, some means by which these poor outcasts may be saved from beggary and utter starvation."

Passing through Sioux territory Beeson remarked on their "cleanliness and fine bearing" and how well fed their ponies appeared. The party passed by several other tribes with no trouble, but then he writes, "a disastrous occurrence took place".

"A company of emigrants having a sick cow, which was unable to travel further abandoned the poor-animal, and left her-by the wayside. The Indians, seeing she was given up, killed her-for-their" own use.

The emigrants, hearing of this, reported at Fort Laramie that the Indians had stolen and killed some of their cattle, upon which, an officer, with a detachment of thirty men, was sent to demand the thief. The Indians, knowing the certainty and severity of impending punishment, for there was the hide, and even the beef, in visible possession,
refused or hesitated to give up any of their number as the criminal; for they well knew that nothing which they could plead would have the least weight with the accusers.

The military order was peremptorily insisted on; and to enforce obedience, a volley was fired over their camp; either-by design or accident, the chief fell dead in the midst. Nothing was more natural than that the Indians should, in their-turn, attack the assailants. Every principle of right or honor recognized among them demanded this; and twenty eight of the white men fell dead beneath the force of their justly-excited resentment."

In consequence of this the Indians were charged with massacre, as well as robbery. War was declared, or supposed to exist; and the following year hundreds of thousands were expended in a campaign against them, although they had, in the interim, done all they could to express their desire for peace and friendship. General Harney, with a glittering array of armed men, both horses and foot, marched onto the Plains, and was met by the Chief, who nobly came forward in advance, and plead with the officer for peace and justice, in behalf of this people.

The General held him in parley, while, in accordance with a pre-concerted arrangement, the Dragoons, by a circuitous route, got in the rear of the Indians, and, at the word of command, opened a promiscuous slaughter of these comparatively defenseless people. Is not such a procedure as this an outrage against every principle of humanity and justice? Is there anything, in all the usages and laws of war, recognized among civilized nations that could save that officer? And all who willingly assisted in the work, from the charge, and from the guilt, of wholesale murder? And yet, acts like this, involving a greater or less amount of wrong, are of almost daily occurrence. And yet, how easily all this horrible waste of life and treasure might have been avoided, if the representatives of our people and government had pursued a different course. If the emigrants had considered the destruction which is continually being made of the Buffalo and other game and the scarcity and often suffering to which the Indians are often subject for want of food, they would have felt no reason for complaint which came with a very ill grace under the circumstances. The cow was made capital only when it was to be turned against the outlawed race, which we are steadily seeking to supplant and destroy. Or, if the officer, instead of demanding an unconditional surrender, had gone in the spirit of kindness to invite an impartial investigation, there would have been no injustice and no bloodshed.

Can we, who claim the rights of Habeas Corpus and trial by our peers, set aside with impunity, observances which are sacred among the rudest tribes, and with a false plea of martial justice, which we have no right to assume, actually commit nameless atrocities in direct violation of a flag of truce, or of an accepted parley? Shall we ever be able to lead our neighbors out of their barbaric conditions by sinking ourselves below the pale of ordinary savagism? No; we can never extend civilization but by making it attractive, and worthy of acceptance. We must exhibit a character worthy of respect, before we can so far gain the confidence of the red man, as to be able to do him good.

Our military can never win honorable laurels in any contest with the Indians, for the world regards such warfare as they would a deadly strife between a giant and a dwarf. The strength is all on one side. But in the case mentioned, our action could not be justified
by even the pretense of war. It was a deliberate massacre of supplicating dependents. Murder in its most revolting and aggravated form."

The Beesons arrived in southern Oregon on August 30th, 1853. Welborn, who had been keeping a diary, described the area. "The valley (here) is about 3 miles wide. It is not the main Rogue River Valley, but a branch of it called Bear Creek runs through the center." The first news they heard after arriving was alarming. There was Indian trouble." On August 31 Welborn wrote, "Weds. We moved a few rods further across the creek near the fort. I like the country very much but it is dangerous to go out very far on account of the Indians, but they are trying to make a treaty with them."

John Beeson soon bought a farm with a two-room log cabin on it. Father and son had their work cut out for them as only part of the land was farmable. The bulk of the work fell to Welborn because the elder Beeson, being a "kind man" was usually off somewhere giving his neighbors a helping hand. His popularity soon waned after he started defending the Indians. "Squatter Sovereignty" is what he termed the white man's taking the land without payment to the aboriginal owners. Feelings began to run high against John and on May 22, 1856, Welborn wrote in his diary, "there was an indignation meeting at the schoolhouse against father on account of his being opposed and writing and talking against the present Indian war. I am afraid father will have to leave this country. Public opinion is so strong against him some would as leave kill him as an Indian just because he has spoken the truth out bold against the rascality of this Indian war, or rather, butchery of the Indians."

The following day Welborn went to Jacksonville on farm business. When he returned he wrote, "I heard a great deal about what the volunteers would do to father. When I got home (and reported on what I had learned) he began to prepare to start to the Willamette Valley this evening. (He also wrote his will.) May 25, Sunday, father started for the Willamette at 11 o'clock last night. I went as far as Fort Lane with him. We arrived there this morning at half past seven. I parted with Father at the Lieutenant’s headquarters at Fort Lane about nine o'clock perhaps for the last time -oh, I hope not. I came home. It rained all the way. I got home at two o'clock. Oh, how lonesome it seems without dear, dear Father. There is nobody but Mother and I at home. I have the whole management of the farm resting on my shoulders. Nobody around here knows that Father is gone yet. It still rains."

Welborn, now farm manager and keeper of the family's property, was just nineteen years old. In the ensuing years John traveled throughout the United States trying in vain to get justice for the Indians. He returned home several times, but tragically his wife died of cancer in 1866, never getting to see her husband again before she died.

John Beeson spent the greater part of his life away from his family lobbying for Indian causes. He returned to the Rogue Valley sometime around 1883. He died in 1889 and was laid to rest, alongside his wife, in Stevens Cemetery on a hill overlooking his farm, about one mile west of Talent.