

THE FIRST WHITE WOMEN IN WYOMING*

Wyoming seems very young when one fully realizes that tomorrow it will be only eighty years since the first white women came into the Great American desert and that particular part of the arid west now known as Wyoming. But these white women did not long tarry within the confines of what is our state. They were on their way to the Oregon country, the route being over the Oregon Trail.

Marcus Whitman of the state of New York and Rev. Samuel Parker were sent in 1835 by missionary boards to visit the Oregon country with a view of establishing mission centers among the Indians who were living west of the Rocky Mountains. Starting on the Oregon Trail from Independence, near the present Kansas City, they journeyed by the usual route that followed the Platte River to Fort Laramie, finally reaching South Pass, a gap in the mountains near the central part of this state. Rev. Mr. Parker while here remarked, "There would be no difficulty in constructing a railroad from the Atlantic to the Pacific." In fact this trail proved to be a very feasible route for those who went to the west, but the trail was never utilized by any railroad, though today the general government has under consideration the use of this trail for a national military highway to the Pacific Coast.

When Whitman and Parker reached Green River, just beyond South Pass, they found so many red men who were eager of the "White Man's Book" that Whitman, the young man, immediately started back to civilization for helpers in the religious work, while Parker, the old man, pushed on into the wilderness with Jim Bridger, the old trapper, for a guide.

Whitman had not been idle, for we find him in the early spring of 1836 again on the Oregon Trail, accompanied by his bride and Rev. H. H. Spalding and his bride. A strange tour it must have been for the two women, quite the most remarkable on record. By June of that year this bridal party was well within the country covered by our state and with them, as an escort, was a party of fur traders. It was at this time that a four wheeled wagon was going over the Oregon Trail, the first that made the entire journey from Independence to Oregon. These wheeled vehicles had to cross the interminable leagues of sunparched plains, through tribe after tribe of savage redmen, who crowded about in awe to see the wonderfully fair creatures, the first

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white women they had ever seen; forded the Platte, the Sweetwater, the Green, and many lesser streams; scrambled through mountain passes; and finally settled down to their life work amid rudest surroundings.

On July 4, 1836, the small caravan reached South Pass. Here the missionaries, with two Nez Perce Indians who had been taken east by Dr. Whitman the previous year, moved over to the Pacific side of the sloping pass, "with Bible in one hand and the American flag in the other fell upon their knees, took possession of the land as the home of American mothers and the church of Christ."

Mrs. Spalding writes in her journal of that date, "It is a reality or a dream that after four months of painful journeying I am alive, and actually standing on the summit of the Rocky Mountains where the foot of a white woman has never before trod." This event of women on the trail to the west was even more significant than that of wagons on the road of the fur trappers. Women and wagons were immediate forerunners of home and representative of more than a temporary journey in this western territory. Many of the mountaineers and trappers not having seen a white woman since childhood, wept when the women took them by the hand. Just beyond the pass at the Green River rendezvous the party was met by four hundred white trappers and traders and fifteen tribes of Indians, all of whom tried to outdo the others in entertaining the white women who, not thoroughly understanding the honor (?), which was something in the nature of a more modern Wild West Show, all but fainted from fright and consternation.

The Wyoming Trail Commission, organized in 1913, has placed a monument on the spot, or as near as may be approximated, where white women for the first time traveled on the Oregon Trail through the historical rift in the Rocky Mountains known afterwards to the thousands and thousands seeking greater opportunities in the extreme northwestern part of the continent, as South Pass. Last week Colonel H. G. Nickerson, president of the Oregon Trail Commission, placed a monument on this spot in commemoration of the event of the first white women to be within the boundaries of our state. On a native stone Colonel Nickerson carved with chisel and mallet this inscription:

NARCISSA PRENTISS WHITMAN
ELIZA HART SPALDING
FIRST WHITE WOMEN TO CROSS THIS PASS
JULY 4, 1836

Significant indeed that at South Pass City, about twelve miles

north and east of the memorable spot, is where Colonel William Bright once lived. He it was who in the year 1869, when he was a member of our first territorial legislature, introduced a bill granting to women the right to equal suffrage, which bill became a law December 10, 1869.

Women and wagons were not only suggestive of our nation's development, but were a permanent factor in the earliest development of the civilization of our nation. Women were synonymous with home and family, while the part the wagons played in a nation's drama was to convey those things that were typical of home, the simple farming implements, seed, a few books, the rocking chair, and, perchance, grandfather's clock.

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