

## PASSING OF AN IMMIGRANT OF 1843

John A. Stoughton, one of the last of the celebrated band of immigrants that crossed the plains to Oregon in 1843,<sup>1</sup> died at the Spokane County Infirmary, at Spangle, on July 1, 1924. He was nearly ninety years old at his death. He was buried at Cheney, beside his wife who died many years ago.

John A. Stoughton was born in Westfield, Mass., September 23, 1830. In 1836 he went with his parents to Mobile, Alabama, and four years later removed with them to Missouri. As a lad of 13 he accompanied the emigrants across the plains to Oregon. Years afterward (the manuscript is not dated) Mr. Stoughton wrote a brief account of his recollections of the journey across the plains. From the original Professor Edmond S. Meany, in 1906, made the following copy:<sup>2</sup>

"In March, 1843, I was in a little town in Missouri, called Weston, and there I heard a speech by Dr. Marcus Whitman.

"On account of that speech a noted lawyer named Peter Burnett<sup>3</sup> afterwards governor of California) took up the cause and canvassed several counties trying to get emigrants to go to Oregon.

"As a reward for his efforts we, the latter part of March, gathered together about twenty wagons to start for a rendezvous where we were to meet others attracted by the speeches of Dr. Whitman from the different states visited by him.

"The rendezvous where we met was about seventy-five miles south of Fort Leavenworth, in the Indian Territory, and there gathered together about two hundred wagons drawn by oxen and averaging about five souls to each wagon.<sup>4</sup>

"On about the 20th of April we made the start and then be-

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1 In a letter to J. Orin Oliphant, dated January 31, 1924, George H. Himes, curator and assistant secretary of the Oregon Historical Society, declared that Mr. Stoughton was not the sole survivor of the emigration of 1843. He said: "I have known Mr. Stoughton quite well, and he is a pioneer of 1843. He is not the only one either. I know two ladies who came in 1843, and there may be others."

2 "This manuscript was copied from the mutilated original loaned to me at Cheney, 18 March, 1906, by Mrs. Mary Elizabeth (Stoughton) Harris, daughter of the author.—Edmond S. Meany."

3 Burnett was elected captain of the organization on May 18, 1843, according to J. W. Nesmith, who was chosen "Orderly Sergeant, with the duties of Adjutant."—Consult "The Occasional Address of Hon. J. W. Nesmith," in *Transactions of the Third Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association* (Salem, 1876).

4 For various estimates of the number of persons in the emigration of 1843, see sources cited by H. H. Bancroft, *History of Oregon*, Vol. I., p. 395, note.

gan an experience of hardships which in my life has never been equaled.<sup>5</sup>

"Our first difficulty was with the soft ground, and I remember seeing as many men as could get hold of a wagon working at the wheels to get it out of the mud, the oxen having to flounder out as best they could. I have seen them up to their sides in the mire.

"In fording the streams we sometimes had twenty wagons fastened together. I remember in crossing the Platte River our end wagons worked downstream until they reached deep water and then rolled over and over, costing us much loss and trouble. We seldom got across a stream without trouble, as we had to swim the cattle; and, to make matters worse, we did not have any road or trail, and in crossing the sage brush country we had to cut our way through.

"Our lives were greatly endangered by buffaloes. We saw thousands upon thousands of them. We had to send out guards to shoot into the herds in order to keep them, when stampeded, from trampling us under foot. For miles in advance we had to keep a close lookout to keep from getting trampled under foot by the maddened animals.

"We also had great trouble with the Indians stopping us and making us pay tribute. One morning we came upon a body of Indians who had just finished a battle. The dead still lay on the ground with arrows sticking in them, and some of them were scalped. The Indians who had won the battle halted us and demanded some of our cattle. We finally compromised by giving them a number of cattle which they killed and proceeded to make merry over their success.

"Everything went well for about a week, when we were halted again by Indians. Just at that moment Kit Carson, under Colonel Fremont, who was sent out by the government to report the best locations for posts, came up. The Indians wanted tribute for the privilege of passing through their country. We told Kit Carson about our being stopped before and he advised us to go out and investigate, saying the Indians were full of tricks and that it might be the same band. Accordingly some of our men went out with him and found to our surprise that it was the same band, eight hundred strong, which had stopped us two hundred miles

<sup>5</sup> Of the departure of this company Nesmith says: "On the 20th of May, 1843, after a pretty thorough military organization, we took up our line of march, with Capt. John Gantt, an old army officer, who combined the character of trapper and mountaineer, as our guide."—*Transactions of the Third Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association*, p. 47.

back. When Kit Carson saw that it was a trick he had the cannon drawn up and every man took his rifle. Confronting the Indians, he demanded that they let us pass, saying they had once been paid and would get no more. As a result of our stand they opened up their lines and let us pass through. We did not see them again.

"When we arrived at Fort Hall, we found it in charge of the Hudson Bay Company. Mr. Grant was the president of the company.<sup>6</sup>

"When we were about one hundred miles from Fort Hall, Doctor Whitman told us that the danger of Indians was over and to make the trailing easier we broke up into little bands, which covered a radius of several miles.

"On arriving at Fort Hall, Mr. Grant tried to discourage us in every possible way, saying that we could not get over the Rocky Mountains and that we had better stop there. Failing to influence us, he next proposed that we trade our cattle and wagons for pack horses, he and his under men almost insisting that we trade them. Just then Doctor Whitman, who had come in a little late, arrived and told us not to pay any attention to Mr. Grant, to rely on him and he would pilot us through in safety. Having great confidence in the man who had been the cause of our starting on the journey, we did his bidding and moved on for a couple of miles and camped for two or three days in order to let all catch up and to rest our tired animals.<sup>7</sup>

"From the first we were well organized.<sup>8</sup> We had a captain, corporals and sentries who stood guard all the time, and one who was found asleep on duty was hauled up and courtmartialled and deprived of his gun.

"Dr. Whitman saved my life in crossing Snake River. We had chained about ten wagons together. There were two islands, and we had to cross from one to the other. In crossing Dr. Whitman rode beside the wagon I had charge of, which was the hind-

<sup>6</sup> Captain James Grant was in charge of Fort Hall at this time.

<sup>7</sup> "Capt. Grant, then in charge of the Hudson Bay Company at Fort Hall, endeavored to dissuade us from proceeding further with our wagons, and showed us the wagons that the emigrants of the preceding year had abandoned, as an evidence of the impracticability of our determination. Dr. Whitman was persistent in his assertions that wagons could proceed as far as the Grand Dalles of the Columbia River, from which point he asserted they could be taken down by rafts or batteaux to the Willamette Valley, while our stock could be driven by an Indian trail over the Cascade Mountains, near Mt. Hood. Happily Whitman's advice prevailed."—J. W. Nesmith, *Transactions of the Third Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association*, p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> Nesmith, in the address already cited, p. 48, says: "It devolved upon me to make up a complete roll of the male members of the company capable of bearing arms, and including all above the age of sixteen years. They were divided into four details for guard duty, thus giving one-fourth of the company a turn of guard duty every fourth day, or as the soldiers express it, we had 'three nights in bed.' I have that old roll before me, and it is the only authentic copy extant."

most wagon. He kept punching the cattle in the sides to keep them from getting into deep water. The current was very strong and came against the bank with terrible force. Before we were across I had got so far below that my horse lunged into deep water and Doctor Whitman, seeing the dangerous position I was in, wheeled around and left the cattle to pull the wagons out and grabbed my horse by the bridle, hollering: 'let go the reins.' He pulled him so that we reached the island in safety. Otherwise I would not have been alive to write this story.

"After we had crossed Snake River, Dr. Whitman left us and went on to his mission. We followed and when we were within about one hundred and fifty miles of the mission we ran short of food and had to send men ahead to Dr. Whitman's to get food. The Doctor had a little pair of burrs with which to grind wheat. After getting their supplies they came back and met us.

"When we arrived at the mission we lay there three weeks and made canoes by digging out the big cottonwood trees and then floated them down the little Walla Walla River to what was then Fort Walla Walla, but now Wallula junction. It was then in charge of the Hudson Bay Company and the officers of the company told us that it would be suicide to start in such canoes as we had and advised us to get canoes of the Indians, which we did. I must say our three weeks were wasted as the canoes we made would turn over if we looked at them. We had to hire an Indian in each canoe to pilot us, as we could not manage such frail crafts and did not know anything about the character of the water we had to pass over. We ran out of provisions before we could reach a Hudson Bay Company supply station.

"We had to drag our canoes around the Cascades falls, which took us two or three days. As we were making this portage we met Colonel Fremont, who had been to the coast and was returning with his report to the government. His meeting us convinced him that it was practicable to cross the continent.

"Just before we reached Fort Vancouver we encountered a terrible wind which caused us to lay up. We had no provisions and our party were forced to eat an old beef hide which had lain in the bottom of the canoe and was watersoaked so that the hair was falling off. Some of them burnt it to a crisp and ate it, but the next day we were able to proceed and reached Fort Vancouver in the evening. We were supplied with food. Dr. McLough-

lin was very good to us.<sup>9</sup> It was Dr. McLoughlin who, when he heard that we had got over the plains as far as Whitman's Mission, said:

"'Tut! tut! tut! the damned Yankees will get to China with their ox wagons yet.'

"Next we went up the Wallamet River and got as far as where Portland now stands and camped. At that time there was nothing there but timber, not even a sign of civilization. From the site of the future Portland we went to Oregon City, our destination, and were received by the missionaries very kindly. They showed us every favor and we stayed with them until we could branch out and get our lands.

"At Oregon City there was a grist mill belonging to the Hudson Bay Company, a sawmill and a store. All the supplies came from England.

"Thus ended my first experience in crossing the plains, which lasted a period of about eight months."

Sixty-three years later, in an interview with a newspaper reporter in Spokane, Mr. Stoughton gave the following brief account of his manner of living in Oregon City immediately after his arrival:

"We settled at Oregon City. For food we had boiled wheat and peas, with the game we killed. The wheat was used just like corn hominy. On Sunday and when we wanted to have a special dish we burned out a hollow place in the top of a fir log and ground the wheat into a sort of flour and made bread out of it. Finally we got a few pigs from the Hudson Bay Company, and then we got on fairly well."<sup>10</sup>

Mr. Stoughton farmed in the Willamette Valley for several years. He went to California in search of gold in 1848, but soon returned to Oregon. In 1850 he married Frances E. Townsend, a pioneer of 1847. In 1879 he went to Cheney, Washington, and settled on a farm in the Four Lakes country, where he lived until 1906. He then went to Oregon, but in the summer of 1922 he returned to Cheney, and from that time until his death he was at the Spokane County Infirmary at Spangle.

Friends in Cheney used to visit Mr. Stoughton often during

<sup>9</sup> "Dr. John McLoughlin, then at the head of the Hudson Bay Company, from his own private resources, rendered the new settlers much valuable aid by furnishing the destitute with food, clothing and seed, waiting for his pay until they had a surplus to dispose of. Dr. John McLoughlin was a public benefactor, and the time will come when the people of Oregon will do themselves credit by erecting a statue to his memory."—J. W. Sesmith, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

<sup>10</sup> Spokane, *Spokesman-Review*, November 26, 1905.

the closing months of his life. These visits were much appreciated by him, for he delighted to talk with them of pioneer days. In the early spring of 1923 Mr. Stoughton was brought by friends to Cheney for a short visit, and while in Cheney he visited the State Normal School and made a short talk to the class in Northwest History.

Mr. Stoughton is survived by two daughters: Mrs. Ida McLean, of Fernwood, Idaho, and Mrs. Mary Elizabeth Harris, of Forest Grove, Oregon. Mrs. Harris was born in Salem, Oregon, in 1854. In 1870 she married Stephen Martin Harris, at Forest Grove, Oregon. Mr. and Mrs. Harris were residents of Cheney for many years. Mr. Harris died in 1923.

J. ORIN OLIPHANT.