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THE COVERED WAGON CENTENNIAL: MARCH OF THE EMPIRE BUILDERS OVER THE OREGON TRAIL¹

Introduction

On February 21, 1930 President Hoover in accordance with a resolution adopted unanimously by Congress, issued a proclamation calling upon the American people to observe the period from April 10 to December 29, of the present year as the "covered wagon centennial." April the 10th was designated the hundredth anniversary of the departure of the first train, consisting of ten wagons and eighty-one persons, from St. Louis toward the Far West over the Oregon Trail. In a letter to Secretary of War Eaton, the leaders of this expedition pointed out the practicability of taking wagons overland to the Pacific Coast. In a sense this initial expedition blazed the way for the caravans that followed bringing the pioneers who have built the great commonwealths on the Pacific Coast.

I think it quite fitting that we students of history in the Northwest commemorate the hundredth anniversary of this occasion with a rehearsal today of this great and fascinating chapter in American history. Although to many of us this will be a familiar tale, I believe that there are few chapters in American history which are more romantic, more stirring, and more inspiring than the story of the march of the American pioneers over a two thousand mile trail—traversing prairie, desert, and mountains—to the land of the setting sun and the mighty Pacific. Some-day this westward march will be told in a great epic that will rival Homer's and Camoen's. Some-day the old Oregon Trail will become a national highway to recall the deeds that have written a significant chapter in our American history.

Before I undertake to describe the covered-wagon procession, I must attempt to answer the pertinent question: what lured the pioneers to the Pacific Coast; what were the impulses that stirred thousands of families and drove them over unexplored regions, over desert and snow-covered mountains; exposing themselves to flood

¹ The paper was read at the Social Science Group of the Inland Empire Educational Association at Spokane, April 10, 1930.

and storm, thirst and starvation, to savage and beast, Our answer is threefold: the spirit of the westward movement, the discontent with conditions in the middle west, and the allurements of the Pacific Coast.

The Westward Movement in American History

The march of the pioneers to the Pacific was only a phase of the general American westward movement. In a sense the westward march of civilization has been going on for thousands of years. Europe was settled by peoples who migrated from Asia. Since the sixteenth century trade has been shifting westward: first from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, and today from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The American westward expansion began when the Europeans left their homes to settle in the western hemisphere. Since that time the movement has been continuing. We can trace it in successive wave lines: in the seventeenth century the frontier reached the Fall Line, by the end of the eighteenth century it crossed the Alleghanies into Kentucky and Tennessee, by 1820 it reached the Mississippi River, and by 1840 it reached the bend of the Missouri.²

The forces which impelled this movement were many. Individually it was the restlessness of the frontiersmen who were always hearing the call of the open spaces, and who believed that opportunity existed a little further on. Collectively, it can be attributed to the manifest destiny spirit, especially since 1815; the growing enthusiasm for expansion, the belief in the moral right of the United States to spread its institutions of liberty from ocean to ocean. The entire nation was imbued with this missionary spirit and obstacles like forests, deserts, savages and beasts may have retarded it but could not stifle it. As early as 1815 the great American expansionist, Thomas Jefferson predicted that the time would come when the American people would control the Pacific Coast.³ That prediction was made when the frontier settlements were yet straggling along the Ohio, when Oregon was yet an everyman's land, and when California was still under the rule of Spain. The expansion of the United States was bound to continue at least until it reached the Pacific Ocean. The usual course of the evolution of the frontier was altered when it reached the Missouri bend and instead of first taking up the plains, the frontiersmen leaped over to the Pacific Coast, because they feared the Indian opposition, and believed in the

2 F. L. Paxson, *The Last American Frontier*, chapter 1.

3 Thomas Jefferson, *Writings*, Library edition, XIII, p. 157.

general tradition that the region was a great desert, unfit for white settlements.⁴

Discontent in the Middle West in the Forties and Fifties

The second explanation for the migration to Oregon in the forties and fifties was the agrarian discontent in the Middle West. Due to the panic of 1837 and to the inadequate means of transportation, western settlers found conditions very discouraging. When crops were plentiful settlers could not dispose of the surplus for want of adequate means of transportation to eastern markets.⁵ Jesse Applegate of St. Clair county, Missouri, sold a steam boat of bacon and lard for \$100. It was told that bacon was used for fuel on the Mississippi boats.⁶ In 1842 wheat sold for twenty-five cents a bushel.⁷ Farming was indeed an unprofitable business in the Middle West in the forties. Then in the forties came disastrous floods.⁸ To these misfortunes were added the usual sickness, chiefly malaria, known as chills or ague.⁹ At times various epidemics would sweep over the entire middle western section. All these misfortunes forced the westerners to ask themselves whether they should stick it out or try their luck on the Pacific Coast where life was pleasanter and the returns greater.

Allurements of the Pacific Coast

What America spelled to the Europeans, the Pacific Coast held in promise to the easterners and middlewesterners. It loomed as a land of promise, a land of fortune. This section has been associated in our minds with romance, with misty glamour, with sublime scenery, and unlimited possibilities—a veritable El Dorado.

The Pacific Coast, especially the Northwest, called the Oregon Country, played a major role in world politics. It was the "swirl of the nations," a bone of international contention among five leading world powers: Spain, Russia, Great Britain, the United States, and France.

The Spaniards, pioneers of pioneers, were the first on the ground with their approach from the south by water.¹⁰ The Russians on their path of empire swept down the coast from the north,¹¹ Great

4 F. L. Paxson, *The Last American Frontier*, pp. 11-12.

5 J. C. Bell, *Opening a Highway to the Pacific*, p. 127.

6 H. H. Bancroft, *History of Oregon*, vol. 1, p. 391, note 1.

7 J. C. Bell, *Opening a Highway to the Pacific*, p. 124.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 127.

9 *Ibid.*, *Oregon Pioneers Association Transactions*, 1893, p. 215.

10 Voyages of Cabrillo, Ferrelo, 1542-1543, Juan Perez, 1774 and others.

11 Beginning with Vitus Bering in 1728. For Russian explorations see Golder, F. A., *Russian Expansion on the Pacific*.

Britain and the United States made their way to the Coast by water and overland.¹² France went no farther than to cast longing glances at this garden of Eden.¹³

A clash was inevitable. Spain, the first to come, was strangely the first to retreat from the Pacific northwest and later from the entire coast.¹⁴ Russia, who by 1821, had experienced a strong spell of expansionism met the resistance of Great Britain and the United States and by 1825 she too withdrew.¹⁵ This happy-hunting ground was left then as a prize of combat to Great Britain and her lusty daughter, the United States.

For more than a quarter of a century—from 1818-1846—the Oregon country was debatable ground taxing the diplomacy of the two nations. We must bear in mind that Oregon then included the entire Pacific northwest, an imperial domain, a mighty sweep of territory from California to Alaska, and from the crest of the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. Not being able to reach some mode of agreement, Great Britain and the United States decided to postpone the settlement of this question, each hoping that with time its cause would gain strength.

This decision may also have been prompted by the fact that during the first half of the nineteenth century England's passion for colonies lay dormant,¹⁶ while in the United States there was yet no great enthusiasm for Oregon. Few in the States knew and cared about that distant and mysterious region on the Pacific Coast. Many in and out of Congress stated that Oregon was too removed from the Union to even hope to become a member of it. "The God of nations," said one, "had interposed obstacles of this connection [of the Atlantic and the Pacific coast] which neither the enterprise nor the science of this or any other age can overcome."¹⁷

It had been estimated that it would take a congressman more than a year to make the round trip to Washington, at a cost to the government of about \$3,720.¹⁸ Many argued that a people of a region so distant would retain no feeling of patriotism toward the United States. Others believed that Oregon was not worth possessing—a country of incessant rain in some part and Sahara-like

12 Such as Francis Drake, James Cook, George Vancouver, Alexander Mackenzie for England. Robert Gray, Lewis and Clark and the Astorians for the United States.

13 The famous La Perouse expedition in 1786, sent by the government.

14 The Nootka Sound controversy in 1790 marks the beginning of Spain's retreat.

15 L. B. Shippee, *The Federal Relations of Oregon* (in *Oregon Historical Society Quarterly*, vol. XIX, no. 3, pp. 189-201).

16 H. Robinson, *Development of the British Empire*, p. 296.

17 S. A. Clarke, *Pioneer Days of Oregon History*, vol. II, pp. 612-14, Senator McDuffie said that he "would not give a pinch of snuff for the whole country." See C. Goodwin, *The Trans-Mississippi West*, p. 308.

18 J. B. McMaster, *A History of the People of the United States*, vol. V, p. 124.

droughts in other portions. Some said that the very word Oregon meant something dry, and barren. Mitchell of Tennessee stated in Congress that he could not understand how any one would want to "seek the inhospitable region of Oregon, unless he wishes to be a savage;" that it would never be inhabited to a great extent—"not even within the reach of fancy itself" would Oregon become a territory. One suggested that Oregon be made a penal colony.¹⁹ Not a few in the East and South were frankly opposed to draining off the population needed in the older states and territories.

Oregon Champions

Happily, there were some minds less pessimistic about the possibility of the country on the Pacific. Oregon had its champions in the East and in the West, in and out of Congress. The two outstanding Oregon sponsors in the twenties and early thirties were Congressman Floyd of Virginia and Hall J. Kelley, a Boston school-teacher. Although they were in advance of their day, their persistent and widespread agitation in the form of speeches, circulars, bills and the founding of emigration societies helped to arouse some interest in that distant land.²⁰

Tales of trappers and traders returning from their far western journeys, and letters written by the missionaries in Oregon were printed in many widely-read journals and were discussed in frontier communities.²¹ Irving's "Astoria" and "The Adventures of Captain Bonneville" which told of the romance of the Far West and the Pacific Coast were most popular in the United States in the thirties and forties.

Aroused by the popular demand for literature dealing with the Pacific Coast, the United States government commissioned several naval and an army officer to investigate and report on that region. The results were Slacum's report in 1837, Wilke's in 1841, and Fremont's account of his survey of the overland trails in 1842. These reports were published and spread broadcast by thousands of copies.²² All the stories, letters, and reports told of the natural beauties, of the healthful climate, and of the great economic possibilities of the coast region. Such reports which pictured Oregon as a kind of dream-land, a garden of Eden served to turn the public mind

¹⁹ Shippee *Opus cit.*, vol. XIX, no. 2, p. 132.

²⁰ An account of Kelley's and Floyd's activities is found in L. B. Shippee's *Federal Relations of Oregon* (in *Oregon Historical Society Quarterly*, vol. XIX, no. 2, pp. 111-132).

²¹ J. C. Bell, *Opening of a Highway to the Pacific*, chapters III, IV.

²² J. Schafer, *A History of the Pacific Northwest*, pp. 160-163. See Wilkes, Charles, *Narrative of the U.S. Exploring Expedition, 1838-1842*.

more and more toward the Pacific Coast. They generated an Oregon Fever. "Oregon itself caught our attention" wrote the eloquent editor of the *Oregonian*, the organ of the Provisional Emigration Society of 1839: "Oregon, the future home of the power which shall rule the Pacific; Oregon, the theatre on which mankind are to act a part not yet performed in the drama of life and government; Oregon, whose far-spreading seas and mighty rivers are to teem with the commerce of an empire, and whose boundless prairies and verdant vales are to feel the footsteps of civilized millions. Oregon was before us in its future glory, and we grasped the prospect of its coming as the impulse of our scheme. We needed no speeches, no reports, to awaken us. Oregon invited us."²³

These stories, reports, and editorials fell upon fertile grounds and receptive minds. The American people of the forties, especially of the Middle West, were frontiersmen by heredity and environment. Their fathers had moved from frontier to frontier. Since childhood they had listened to and read the daring adventures, true and false, of the frontiersmen. Pioneering and frontiering had become a religion with them. They felt cramped when the country around them began to fill up. When stories of a new country reached them they would become restless with an irresistible desire to move on. An excellent characterization of the situation is the following description by a contemporary:

"Fearlessness, hospitality, and independent frankness, united with restless enterprise and unquenchable thirst for novelty and change, are the peculiar characteristics of the western pioneers. With him there is always a land of promise further west, where the climate is milder, the soil more fertile, better timber and finer prairies; and on, on, on he goes, always seeking and never attaining the Pisgah of his hopes. You of the old states cannot readily conceive the everyday sort of business the "old settler" makes of selling out his "improvements," hitching the horses to the big wagon, and, with his wife and children, swine and cattle, pots and kettles, household goods and household gods, starting on a journey of hundreds of miles to find and make a new home.

"Just now Oregon is the pioneer's land of promise. Hundreds are already prepared to start thither with the spring, while hundreds of others are anxiously awaiting the action of congress in reference to that country, as the signal for their departure. Some have already been to view the country, and have returned with a flattering tale of

²³ Quoted in J. C. Bell, *Opening of a Highway to the Pacific*, p. 99.

the inducements it holds out. They have painted it to their neighbors in the brightest colors; these have told it to others; the Oregon fever has broke out, and is now raging like any other contagion."²⁴

By 1840 Oregon was certainly in the air. There were some ten emigration societies in the United States. The members of these associations believed that the occupation of the Oregon country would not only be a boon to the individual settlers, but would perform at the same time a service to the nation by holding the land against Great Britain. Meetings were held in many western and eastern communities to discuss the question of emigration to adopt resolutions and to appeal to Congress for inducements in form of land grants.²⁵

At some of these meetings addresses were made, to create enthusiasm, by men who had been to the Pacific Coast. In these addresses and speeches the coast was pictured in most glowing colors. In Weston, Missouri, Roubidoux, a returned fur trader, thrilled his audience by telling them of the beauties and pleasantness of the Coast. He told that malaria fever known as "the shakes" was so rare that the entire country near Monterey turned out to see the amazing spectacle of a person, a native of Missouri who was shaking with the fever.²⁶ Nearly every one in Weston agreed to emigrate to the Pacific Coast, that blessed land. The merchants in town, threatened with a wholesale exodus, spread counteracting reports to discourage this movement.²⁷

By 1840 the American people were becoming Oregon-minded. Thousands of aggressive settlers with "westward ho" as their motto were beginning to move toward that land of fortune where there are no cyclones, no "shakes," where nature is kind and the economic conditions most promising. They meant to hold this land for themselves and for their nation. The thrilling ride of Whitman did not save Oregon because Oregon was in no danger of being lost.

In Congress friends of Oregon like Linn, Benton, and by this time Cushing were working perseveringly for the occupation of that country. Other politicians ever keeping their ears to the ground, grasped the situation, and by 1844 the Oregon question became one of the most important planks of the Democratic platform as expressed in the alliterative phrase "fifty-four forty or fight"—(even

²⁴ Letter from Iowa Territory, dated March 4, 1843, printed in the *National Intelligencer*, April 18, 1843. Also found in *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, vol. III, pp. 311-312.

²⁵ J. C. Bell, *Opening of a Highway to the Pacific*, pp. 101-112.

²⁶ J. Bidwell, *California, 1841-1848*, pp. 5-10. Ms. in Bancroft Library, University of California.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

though the Oregon part of the platform may have been a mere tail to the Texas kite.)²⁸

Great Britain, proud and aggressive, resented the speeches and bills of Linn and his colleagues in Congress. "A grotesque proposal," "a mere discharge of blank cartridges to intimidate Lord Aberdeen to bully England" exclaimed the London Times "an act of insolence" said another.²⁹ But by 1846 even the proud Great Britain accepted the 49th degree line previously offered by the United States.

Having sketched the conditions and motives that were responsible for the migration to the Pacific Coast, let us now briefly describe the march of the pioneers over the Oregon Trail, which was probably the longest trail in the world. The Siberian road may equal it in length but not in its difficulties. The pioneers of the eighteenth century had to cross only the lowly Appalachians and the entire trail into Kentucky and Tennessee was not more than some 400 miles. The Oregon Trail was opened not by government engineers, nor by emigrant settlers, but by wild animals, Indians, white trappers, and traders. These pioneer trail-makers crossed the plains, deserts, and mountains by the routes that offered the fewest impediments and the greatest inducements to travel.³⁰ By 1842 the many trails across the plains, deserts, and mountains were well connected and formed the national highway known as the Oregon Trail, the Mormon Trail, the California Trail, and the Overland Trail. The Indians called it the "Great Medicine Road of the Whites" or the "White-topped wagon road."

With every recurring spring, either spontaneously or as the result of the arrangements of the committees of correspondence, hosts of settlers from Iowa, Illinois, Missouri and other frontier communities began to pour into the outfitting towns, sometimes called jumping off places, like Independence, Westport and Council Bluffs. They came in their white covered-wagons, by steam boats, and later by train.³¹ They came in single families and entire neighborhoods. The outfitting places were at this time all in a bustle with

²⁸ Cass said: "Our claim to the country west of the Rocky Mountains is as undeniable as our right to Bunker Hill or New Orleans" (*Niles' Register*, July 29, 1843). On the other hand John Quincy Adams said of the campaign of 1844 that it was "a mock enthusiasm for the territory of Oregon and a hurricane of passion for Texas, blown to fury by congressional and Texan bond and land holders." *Niles' Register*, November 23, 1844.

²⁹ Quoted in *Niles' Register*, April 22, 1843; Shippee, *Federal Relations of Oregon*, in *Oregon Historical Society Quarterly*, vol. XIX, no. 4, p. 302.

³⁰ H. M. Chittenden, *History of the American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol. 1, (New York, 1902).

³¹ Peter Burnett, *Letters*, (in *Oregon Historical Society Quarterly*, vol. III, p. 405); F. G. Young, *The Oregon Trail*, (in *Oregon Historical Society Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 4, pp. 359-360).

hotels crowded and camping places filled to capacity. Here the emigrants would provide themselves with food to last them five to six months, with firearms, wagons, horses, mules or oxen. There was a difference of opinion concerning the relative merits of mules and oxen for drawing the covered wagons. Mules were more expensive, six of them costing about \$600, while eight oxen could be purchased for \$200. For short distances and on good roads with sufficient food, mules were preferred, as they travelled faster and could endure the heat better. But for journeys of great distance over rough and muddy roads oxen proved to be more desirable. Oxen would not stampede easily and could stand the strain better. While horses could be driven about 20-24 miles a day with safety, oxen averaged only about sixteen miles daily.³²

At the outfitting stations, the emigrants organized themselves into companies. Many trains took special precautions to attach to their group only individuals of proper character and adequate means of food and transportation. Organization was considered necessary for protection as the train had to pass the territory of the Pawnees, Cheyennes, and Sioux. Organization was also necessary in order to procure guides. These guides were usually experienced trappers who would travel ahead of the company to select camping places. While banding together was desirable and more safe, there were, however, many objections to groups of too large size, for adequate grazing facilities for large bands were difficult to procure. In the events of accidents a large number were naturally delayed. Frequently dissensions arose. The emigrant not encumbered with cattle wanted to travel faster than could the one who was burdened with live-stock. As a result, large companies frequently broke up into smaller groups, especially when the South Pass was reached and the danger from Indians was past.³³

The emigrant train usually opened its journey at the end of May or by the first part of June. Few hours of travel brought it through western Missouri to the entrance of the Indian country. For about two days the train traveled over the excellent Santa Fe Trail where it met on the way many wagons laden with the manufactured goods from the United States headed for the Mexican pro-

³² *Ibid.*, 418-19. Mules in 1487 were from \$40 to \$50 each, while oxen were \$30-\$40 a yoke. Wagons were from \$80-\$90 each. See *Letters and Circulars of Information for Prospective Emigrants to California and Oregon*, (in *Oregon Historical Society Quarterly*, vol. XI, pp. 307-312).

³³ Peter Burnett, *Letters*, (in *Oregon Historical Society Quarterly*, 1902-3, vol. III, gives rules and regulations for the emigration of 1843. See also Young, *op. cit.*, pp. 360-363.

vinces.³⁴ About forty miles from Independence, at the present site of Gardner, Kansas, the train reached the spot where the Santa Fe and Oregon Trails met. A simple sign board bore the legend, "Road to Oregon," and to China and to Japan may be added.

Turning northwestward over the Oregon Trail, the wagon procession continued paralleling the Kansas River, fording it at Topeka or Unitown. Here the emigrants would stop for a brief time to settle various difficulties that may have arisen en route. For according to the "unwritten law of the plains" all grievances had to be settled by a jury.³⁵

Upon entering the Valley of the Little Blue, the train encountered the Pawnees who frequently exacted tolls from the immigrants. Three hundred and sixteen miles from Independence the emigrants reached the Platte River.³⁶ Irving called it "the most magnificent and most useless of rivers." Its waters are muddy and abound in quicksands. Across the river ran the route that was later called the Mormon Trail. On the south side of the Platte the government established in 1848 Fort Kearney, which was the first important military post on the Trail. From this point travel was resumed in the valley of the Platte.

The journey over the prairies, especially during the first few days in a season free from storms and epidemics, was not unpleasant. The long single or several trains of white covered wagons called "prairie schooners" rolling over the green undulating prairie made a pretty picture. At a distance it resembled a long line of sail boats gliding over the green ocean. At the head of the caravan rode the best marksmen who could pick up fresh game. Along the sides of the wagons walked or rode the men swinging their ox-hide goads. Within the wagons traveled the women and children surrounded by their house-hold equipment. The air was exhilarating, the road good, the panorama not yet monotonous. Everyone emanated a feeling of freedom. Indeed it seemed like a grand excursion.³⁷

With the setting sun, the train halted and formed a coral of its wagons which was to serve as an impregnable arrangement

34 Overton Johnson and William H. Winter, *Route Across the Rocky Mountains, An Account of the Migration of 1843*, (*Oregon Historical Society Quarterly*, 1906-1907, vols. 7-8, p. 65).

35 *Ibid.*

36 Burnett, *Letters*, (*Oregon Historical Society Quarterly*, 1902-3, vol. III, p. 43).

37 Interesting descriptions of the march of the pioneers are found in F. G. Young, *Oregon Trail*, (*Oregon Historical Society Quarterly*, 1900, vol. I, pp. 339-370; Overton Johnson and William H. Winter, *Route Across the Rocky Mountains*, (*Oregon Historical Society Quarterly*, 1906-1907, vols. 7-8, pp. 62-104, 163-210, 291-327; James Nesmith, *Diary of the Emigration of 1843*, (*Oregon Historical Society Quarterly*, 1906, vol. III, pp. 329-359); Jesse Applegate, *A Day with the Cow Column in 1843*, (*Oregon Historical Society Quarterly*, 1900, vol. I, pp. 372-383); Amos William Hartman, *The California and Oregon Trail, 1849-1860*, (*Oregon Historical Society Quarterly*, 1924, vol XXV, pp. 1-35); W. J. Ghent, *The Road to Oregon*, 1929.

against attacks from the Indians. On the outer side of the camp glimmered the fires for the preparation of supper. After the evening meal an hour or two were devoted to merriment—especially by the younger element who indulged in song and dance. The fiddle and the flute were the orchestra. Early to bed was not a mere resolution with the emigrants. Sleep came easily for the hardy travelers and night found the wagons furnishing a bed for women and children, while the men found a resting place near or under the wagons with only a blanket or wagon cover as protection against the elements. During the quiet of the night our frontiersmen could gaze into the starry sky. He could hear the howling of the wolves. At times a feeling of loneliness, of homesickness may have crept over him, but this was soon replaced by the thought of the promised land, of the ease and plenty to come. Hopes were sky high, for the majority of the emigrants were under forty-five years of age.

Upon reaching the plains, the emigrants found the timber thinner and the grass short and curly, well adapted to the herds of buffalo that roamed here. About 571 miles from the beginning of the journey the train entered a country of strange conformation of landscape: Chimney Rock, Court House Rock.

At the confluence of the Platte and the Laramie—about 667³⁸ miles from Independence, the trail left the plains. At this point the travelers stopped to overhaul and rearrange their cargo and to rest from the strain of the journey.

If they could continue without hindrances—storms, floods or bad roads,—forty days of travel brought our pioneers to Fort Laramie. The Fort was built in 1834 by trappers and later purchased by the government.³⁹ It was used as a military post from 1849-1890 during which time it saw many stirring events. Here the Mormon Trail united with the Oregon. From here the Montana or Bozeman trail branched off. Fort Laramie afforded the travelers a necessary rest stop.

Upon leaving Laramie the train continued up the Platte valley. It now reached Big Springs—a warm spring 689 miles from Independence. Although the scenery was superb and the sky clear, travelling was made more difficult by rough ground. Eighty-nine miles, beyond this place was Deer Creek, a favorite stopping point. At 19 miles west, the train reached Independence Rock, a famous landmark on the trail—a solitary pile of granite. Father de Smet

³⁸ The table of distances given here follows the one given by H. M. Chittenden in his *History of the American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol. I.

³⁹ Overton Johnson and William H. Winter, *Op. cit.*, p. 77.

aptly called it the "Great Register of the Desert," for on it the emigrants inscribed the names of those who had succumbed en route. Later it became a custom for travelers to add their names as they passed, so that the following train could read of those who had preceded them.⁴⁰

Travelling 5 miles farther, the emigrant reached Devil's Gate, a granite ridge through whose rift flows the Sweet-Water and from whose top one could see a most magnificent view. From Devil's Gate the train passed along the Sweet-Water, crossed the river, and continued over a dusty alkaline road.

After covering 947 miles of the steady journey, the procession reached South Pass, one of the most celebrated passes in the entire length of the Great Divide; a broad plateau about 7500 feet above sea level. Here hail Oregon! For here our emigrants reached the place commonly considered the entrance to the Oregon country, and about equal distance to Vancouver and to Independence. Five miles beyond, and the travelers arrived at Pacific Springs, the first water of the Pacific. The route here was disagreeable due to its barren, sandy wastes.

Fort Bridger, 1070 miles from the starting point was the second important stopping place on the Trail. The Fort was built in a beautiful spot by James Bridger in 1843 to supply emigrants with necessities, and it became a regular Oasis in the desert. Here travelers arranged their wagons and made necessary repairs. Until 1848 it was in Mexican Territory, but no one paid attention to this fact. The fort was at the cross-roads—the trails parted here: one leading to California, the other to Oregon.

By the middle of August the train reached Fort Hall, 1288 miles from Independence, an important station on the left bank of the Snake River. At this terminal which belonged to the Hudson Bay Company at first, the travelers made preparations for the last lap of the journey to the Columbia River. Companies broke up into smaller groups. Many left their wagons in exchange for pack mules. The Trail ran west along the south side of the Snake to American Falls and on to the mouth of the Raft River where in 1846 a California trail branched off south westward to the headwaters of the Humboldt. 1537 miles from Independence, the trail reached the Boise River where the town by that name now stands. 1736 miles from the outset of the journey the slowly moving procession came to the Grande Ronde valley, an ideal pasture and camping ground.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, James W. Nesmith, *Diary*, p. 344.

From here the trail led through the Blue Mountains whose ruggedness offered many difficulties to the already exhausted travelers. At the 1791 mile point they reached the first significant place west of the Blue Mountains—the Umatilla River where Pendleton now stands. Another route from the Grand Ronde valley ran in a northerly direction and reached the Columbia at the mouth of the Walla Walla.

From Umatilla, it ran down the south bank of the Columbia to The Dalles 1934 miles from Independence and from The Dalles to the Cascades and then on to Fort Vancouver 2020 miles from the starting point—to the end of the Trail.

Hardships on the Trail

However novel and exhilarating the journey may have been at the outset, it soon presented numerous hardships. However bouyant and hopeful our pioneers began on their westward march, some eventually grew exhausted and despondent. The painfully slow means of progress made even the most inspiring scenery monotonous. Inclement weather with thunder-storms that resembled the discharge of artillery and rains that soaked the weary marchers through and through added much to their discomfort. Swollen streams and boggy roads, torturing mosquitoes and annoying flies provided further obstacles. These were followed by spells of terrific heat and enveloping dust. Man and beast felt the merciless strain of the desert. Horses and oxen, trudging with their heavy burdens and exhausted from incessant labor without relief from the heat and without sufficient food frequently dropped in their tracks. Their masters with eyes and lips swollen by the burning sun, with bodies strained to the very limit of exhaustion and despondency fared no better than did the beasts. Animal carcasses filled the worn trail, and human bodies were lain in graves too shallow for protection from prowling wolves and savages. Normal conditions of travel took its toll in great enough numbers, but in years of misfortune as in 1849-1850 when cholera followed the weary emigrants from the Mississippi to the Rocky Mountains unbelievable terror and tragedy spread among them. Wagons and household goods were left by the road-side. Graves dotted the trail. About 2,000 persons succumbed in the year 1849, while 5,000 lost their lives in 1850.

But time could not be lost—they had to hurry on—they had a goal to reach. Should they tarry, the winter storms may catch them in the mountains. After suffering the cruelties of the desert, they had one more feat to perform. They must scale the mountains. The

towering walls before them urged them to the use of their last ounce of physical resources. Those who had conquered thus far were not to be baffled. They went "over the top" and for their sturdy enterprise and long suffering were rewarded with a goal of fertile fields, clement climate, and sublime scenery.⁴¹

Song of the Pioneers

"Through the land of the savage foes
See the long procession goes
Till it camps by the Columbia of the West;
Where the mountains block the stream,
And the cascades flash and gleam,
And the sun sinks to his distant ocean rest.
Tramp, tramp, tramp, the trains keep marching;
At length the deadly plains are passed;
But there is still the deadly river trail
And the cascade range to scale;—
Then the fair Willamette homes are reached at last."

Extent of Migration—40's and 50's

The estimate number of emigrants that came to Oregon during the forties and fifties is as follows:

1842 about 112 to 137.	1848 about 700
1843 about 875 to 1000	1849 about 400
1844 about 700	1850 about 2,000
1845 about 3,000	1851 about 1,500
1846 about 1,350	1852 about 2,500 ⁴²
1847 about 4,000 to 5,000.	

Up to 1849 emigration took place mainly to Oregon and was composed chiefly of settlers who came with their families to found homes. With 1849 began the rush to the gold fields of California; an emigration of adventurers and fortune seekers. The number of emigrants to Oregon now dwindled, while that to California increased many fold.

The number passing the Oregon Trail during this period was amazing. In April 1849, 20,000 were camped along the Missouri. By May 18, it was estimated that some 2,850 wagons had gathered along the Missouri. The emigration of 1850 was still larger. By July 8, there were registered at Fort Laramie 37,570 men and 845 women, 1126 children, 9,101 wagons, 31,502 oxen, 22,873 horses,

⁴¹ For details of the journeys across the country see books and articles mentioned in note 37.

⁴² F. G. Young, *Op. cit.*

7,650 mules, and 5,754 cows; while some 2,470 emigrants hurried by without registering. One witness reported that on June 21 at the upper crossing of the Platte could be seen a "continuous unbroken procession" on the main highway. About 23,000 passed Fort Kearney in 1852. The total for that year was estimated about 50,000.⁴³

During 1860-1870 thousands of settlers moved overland to the Far West. In 1864 the plains were said to be covered with wagons. The Trail was a veritable highway with numerous parallel routes and short cuts. The coming of the iron horse naturally displaced the usefulness of the Trail. But traveling on the pioneer's highway was still continued even after 1870 by those unable to pay the cost of railway transportation. By that time, however, the country had become more or less settled and the emigrant met with fewer difficulties than did his predecessors. The day of isolation and the frontier had passed.

About three quarters of a century have passed since the days of the march of the empire builders over the Oregon Trail. Since that time that great national highway has undergone many transformations. The portion of the Trail from the start to Grand Island on the Platte has been surveyed, plowed up, cultivated and settled. The precise location of the Trail at this point is not easy to identify. But that part of the highway running from Grand Island westward and lying in less populated districts and river valleys is still known and in places visible; especially the grooves worn by the wheels of the covered wagon. Today the traveler may rush through this region in the comfortable Pullman or his soft cushioned automobile entirely unmindful of the trudging procession of the forties and fifties who have opened this country for him.

During the last century there have grown up on the Pacific Coast several prosperous and flourishing commonwealths. Their problems and interests have attracted a great deal of attention from the national government. To some extent they have served as a laboratory for social legislation, which is another way of saying that they are yet pioneering and frontier communities.

What the future holds in store for these commonwealths is easily imaginable when we bear in mind the natural wealth of this region: its timber, fisheries, minerals, oil fertile soil suitable for stock and poultry, potential water power, healthful climate, and splendid scenery. Because of the location of this section facing the Pacific

43 H artman, *Op. cit.*, pp. 2-3; McMaster, *Op. cit.*, vol. VIII, p. 58.

and the awakening of the Orient, it is destined to become the greatest highway for world commerce. The Pacific Coast will inevitably become the front door of the United States through which will flow trade and wealth, and with prosperity will come civilization, culture, and all the finer things of life.

But to fully appreciate the present and the future of this region, one must have a fair understanding of the stages through which it passed; of its early growth and development. Here history serves its purpose. Some of the fifty-seven varieties of objectives of history may or may not be true, but one fact remains. History is the only study that can give us a comprehensive understanding of the rise and development of civilizations; whether it be the history of the entire race, of a nation, or merely of a section of a country. It unfolds to us a wonderful panorama of life: of man's ambitions, aspirations, struggles, failures and successes. The study of history of the Pacific Coast, especially of the Northwestern states which are closely related in many respects, affords us a full appreciation of the past and the present of this region. We feel that we can almost live again that inspiring chapter, we can almost hear the echoes of the pioneer days in the trails of the mountains, along the rushing streams, and in the depths of the forests, for it has been aptly said: "No man is fit to be entrusted with the control of the *Present*, who is ignorant of the *Past*, and no *People*, who are indifferent to their *Past*, need hope to make their future great."

JOSEPH ELLISON.