

Chapter Fourteen

Rescue Efforts

On November 26, 1846, the fledgling *Oregon Spectator* newspaper published the following editorial giving an accurate assessment of the plight of the emigrants on the Southern Route. The piece was written by their new editor George Curry, a recent 1846 emigrant who had arrived well over one month earlier traveling the northern route:

*EDITOR CURRY: -- Our latest intelligence concerning the emigrants who are on the southern route, comes to us from some gentlemen who have recently arrived in this place, after having "packed" into the settlements. At the time of their departure from the wagons (about twenty days since,) which number altogether, as we are informed, number only eighty, some few of the first were this side of the Callapoiah mountains; the most of them however, were still engaged in crossing the Umpqua mountains. They had experienced considerable suffering, from exposure and hard labor, and bravely surmounted numerous difficulties. We regret to state that Mr. **William Smith** died instantaneously -- probably occasioned by overexertion -- in the kanyon of the Umpqua mountains. ...¹*

As the deceased William Smith's young daughter Angeline Smith (Crews) later reflected:

ANGELINE SMITH: Those young men that had left the company, about three or four weeks later came into Salem, Oregon, about the first of December, almost starved and bare-footed, and almost destitute of clothes, and told the news of the lost train of emigrants. If they had not of got through, the whole train would of perished, for it was impossible for them to get in to settlement, for winter was setting in, and the cattle was starving and giving out.

James Campbell's pack party probably arrived a few days before publication of the November 26 editorial. They took several days to assemble and provision their numerous pack horses, and then departed the settlements on November 30, as rescuer Thomas Holt informed us later (see December 8 entry, below). Thus the departure of both Campbell and the two young men who had gone forward for supplies from the Umpqua Canyon area shortly after the first part of November coincides roughly with the editorial's "twenty days" en route for those who packed into the settlements for provisions (see previous chapter).

On November 30, the next day after Thornton arrived at his new home in the settlements on Salt Creek, he fulfilled a promise he had made to fellow-emigrant Rev. Joseph Cornwall when he left. Thornton wrote a letter to the

Oregon Spectator telling of his starving fellow South Road emigrants still trying to reach the settlements, and pleading for their relief:

THORNTON: Editor of the Spectator: -- I have just arrived in the settlements of this valley from the Kenyon [sic] of the Umpqua mountains. I left the people suffering beyond any thing you have ever known. They must [shall] perish with hunger unless the people of the settlements go to their relief with pack horses and provisions and bring them in. They will have property with which to pay for such services. If they are not brought away they must perish. Before I left they had already commenced eating the cattle that had died in the Kanyon. At least one hundred head of pack horses should be taken out immediately. I implore the people of this valley, in the name of humanity, and in behalf of my starving and perishing fellow travelers to hasten to their relief.

In haste, I am sir, yours &c. J. Quinn Thornton.²

Two weeks after the bi-weekly *Spectator* published its earlier Nov. 26 editorial – Thornton’s plea was published on December 10 -- which was after the various major relief efforts were already underway. A follow-up letter by Thornton published February 13, 1847, giving details of the suffering, drew a caustic rejoinder in David Goff’s name, written by Goff’s son-in-law lawyer James Nesmith. Nesmith took Thornton’s appeals as “a most bitter and false attack” upon the integrity and motives of the South Road exploring party members – who continued to claim their new route was not only “the best, but also the shortest route to Oregon. Later, this exchange between lawyers nearly escalated into a shoot out, that never transpired.³

Fortunately, there were several major relief efforts that originated around the beginning of December from the Willamette Valley settlements in Polk County and nearby Salem. The most prominent of these efforts was led by **Thomas Holt**, who provided a very thorough and apparently highly accurate daily account of his efforts -- and those of other relief parties he met along his way – in their mutual objective of rescuing the stranded and starving emigrants.⁴

Thirty-one-year-old Thomas Holt had come out on the same 1844 wagon train as Levi Scott, and would become one of the founders of the Marion County town of Jefferson, located across the Willamette from Polk County. Early on, Holt took an interest in the attempts to find a Southern Route into Oregon, and became greatly concerned about what he was hearing regarding the condition of the South Road emigrants who were suffering and near starvation in their struggle to reach the settlements.

Acting mainly on his own volition and at his own expense, Holt began one of what would be several efforts to bring relief to the South Road emigrants still struggling to reach the settlements. Three of these were major relief efforts, that brought with them at least two dozen pack animals each. These animals served the dual purpose of packing out food provisions, and presumably packing in emigrant families -- perhaps with some meager belongings, and hopefully

carrying enough food for them until they reached the settlements.

December 3 -- Holt assembled a band of thirty-four pack horses, and together with six mixed-blood French and Indian men to help drive them, left off from the same spot in Polk county where Jesse Applegate and the men of the South Road exploring party had departed over five months earlier, in their search for a new and better overland route into the Willamette Valley from the south.

Accompanying Holt were Jean Baptiste Gardapie (who immigrated to Astoria in 1811), and native-born Q. Delore. Holt's party may also have included nineteen-year-old Gerard Caldwell, emigrant widow Margaret Caldwell's son, who was said to have been sent ahead to get provisions when their large family ran out. Although Holt says nothing of the Caldwells in his diary, they eventually made their home near him in Jefferson, and daughter Liona Caldwell married Holt the next year.⁵

December 4 -- Holt's party crossed over the Rickreall River, proceeded down the Old Trapper's Trail and camped on the Little Luckiamute River in the vicinity of Lewisville -- near where Thornton had reported staying with the Lewis family less than ten days earlier.

December 5 -- The rescuers swam both Luckiamute branches, and camped on Soap Creek. Here, Holt met the first of the South Road emigrants to have reached the settlements, Mrs. John Newton, whose husband had recently been murdered in his tent by three Indians. The widow Newton was being aided into the settlements by explorer and emigrant guide David Goff.

Teenagers Elizabeth and Jacob Currier, who were traveling with their sister Sally Ann Currier Humphrey and her husband Augustus Humphrey (whom Thornton mentioned earlier as being the only one to have come through the canyon with his wagon and team fully intact) claimed to be the first wagon through the canyon, their three wagons having crossed Mary's River on December 5.⁶

December 6 -- Holt's party swam their horses across Mary's river on the north side of present-day Corvallis, and met "five families with their wagons here, and one family packing." Holt does not identify by name many of the emigrant families he passed on his way south, especially those to whom he gave little or no assistance. It is likely that the Garrison family was one of those Holt met at Mary's River, as they were among the first parties into the Willamette valley. The Garrisons gave December 12 or 13 as the date of arrival at their home on Salt Creek in Yamhill County, which corresponds with the six days it would have taken to get there from Mary's River. Relatives from the settlements who had brought "a yoke of fresh oxen and a number of pack horses" had rescued Father A. E. Garrison, and son A. H. Garrison. The father said the "first night after leaving LaCreole [River] we had put up at Jesse Applegates. I had hoped I could get a beef of him and the more especially since he was the man with others who had brought on such destitution and suffering, but as I was scarce of money I failed in making the purchase."

Emigrant guide Orus Brown had arrived in the settlements nearly two months earlier as a result of his having come over the northern route. Hearing of his family's plight he was now traveling "in company with some others coming back with pack horses to bring in those behind." Back on December 3, chronicler Virgil Pringle had abandoned the canoe on which he had been working and left his family near present-day Junction City, and headed for the settlements on horseback to obtain provisions for them. Three days later, after crossing the swollen Long Tom River on December 6, Pringle met his brother-in-law Orus Brown, coming southward in relief of his Pringle-Brown relatives.

TABITHA BROWN" ... our scanty provisions were all gone. We were in a state of starvation. ... We had all retired to rest in our tents, hoping to forget our troubles until daylight should remind us again of our sad fate. In the gloomy stillness of the night, footsteps of horses were heard rushing toward our tents. Directly a haloo! It was the well-known voices of Orus Brown and Virgil Pringle. Who can realize the joy?

Tabitha Brown, 66-year old mother of both Orus Brown and Virgil Pringle's wife Pherne Brown, explained later that her son Orus had originally migrated in 1843, returned home for his family, and then piloted two of the 1846 parties. He had been six days ahead of them when they reached Ft. Hall, so he had arrived there over a week before Jesse Applegate. Knowing nothing of the new South Road, he had proceeded on down the regular Oregon Trail route, probably assuming his relatives were following. He reached the settlements in early October.⁷

On their way back to the settlements Octavius Pringle told how they had hired some of the rescue-party men with pack horses and swam across the swollen Long Tom, Mary's, Luckiamute, and Rickreall Rivers without any bridge or ferry. Finally, "upon Christmas Day we landed at Salem, barefoot, weary and worn out."⁸

December 7 -- Holt then traveled 18 miles and camped on the north shore of the Long Tom River, which winds generally northward starting west of Eugene, and joins the Willamette several miles north of today's Monroe. December 8 -- "Crossed our pack[s] over the river in a canoe, and swam our horses. We overtook Capt. Campbell, Mr. Goodman, Mr. Jenkins, Mr. Harris, with 25 horses and some provisions. They all tell us that they are going to the kanyon. We have more help than Capt. Campbell and we travel faster -- he started three days before us. We met three [emigrant] families packing, and one family with a wagon. They tell us they have had nothing to eat today -- the children are crying for bread: we let them have fifty pounds of flour. Traveled 4 miles through a mirery prairie and camped on a slough."

Emigrant James Campbell was then returning with provisions, perhaps along with Stephen Jenkins 25, supposedly also a South Road emigrant, and

possibly with the "Mr. Goodman" named here. Explorer Moses "Black" Harris had arrived some two months earlier with the Applegates' road party, and decided to join the rescuers.⁹ Harris was again going readily to the relief of the emigrants, just as he had the previous year for those similarly unfortunate souls who had taken the disastrous 1845 Meek Cutoff.

December 9 – "We met 8 wagons and as many families all out of provisions: we gave 10 pounds of flour to each family. Traveled 5 miles and camped on the Willamette [probably northeast of today's Junction City]. We waited for Capt. Campbell to go ahead with the provisions, as we have no more to spare."

These "eight families with wagons" were very likely the large Linville party -- including the remaining members of the Linville, Vanderpool, Bounds, Lovelady, Crowley, and John Burriss Smith families (no relation) – who had traveled with Scott near the forefront of the entire Southern Route from its beginning. They probably had most of their wagons and teams somewhat intact after going through the canyon near the forefront of the lead company, and likewise arrived around Christmas time, as had the Pringles.

December 10 -- "Traveled 14 miles and camped on Goose Creek. There are a number of families encamped here waiting for assistance: their teams have given out. [Rescuers] Mr. Owens, Mr. Patten, Mr. Duskins, Mr. Hutchins, Mr. Howell, and Mr. Burrows overtook us today with 24 horses."

Holt met this third major relief party near present-day Eugene. Their two-dozen horses raised the total number of pack animals brought by the three major relief efforts to eighty-three. Adding to this count the other pack horses brought by Orus Brown, Garrison's relatives, and others, the total number of pack animals delivered probably approached the 100 horses that Thornton suggested would be needed in his November 30 letter to the *Spectator*. As events turned out, these horses and what supplies the relief parties could muster, undoubtedly made the difference between life and death for a very large number of the emigrants traveling the South Road.

LUCY HENDERSON: After great hardship and discomfort we finally made our way through Cow Creek Canyon. We came on northward, having very hard going as it was late in the year and the winter rains had started. We had been eight months on the road, instead of five, so we were out of food and our cattle were nearly worn out. We crossed the river near the present site of Roseburg by tying two canoes together and putting the wagons on them and ferrying them over.

We had obtained some fresh meat from some trappers and a day or so later my mother's brother, Mr. Holman, met us. He had heard of our plight, so he came with food and horses to get us. We left the wagons and with Mother on one horse holding her six-week-old baby on her lap, and with one of the little children sitting behind my uncle, Mr. Holman.¹⁰

The Henderson family passed by Avery's cabin near today's Corvallis

around December 17, going north. As Holt passed the same cabin around December 7 headed south, these two groups must have passed each other sometime between those two dates, possibly in the Eugene area. The Hendersons' rescuer was their mother Rhoda Holman's brother Daniel Holman, age twenty-four, who had brought his father John Holman to Oregon in 1843. Young Holman had been involved in a similar relief effort for several of his brothers and sisters who had come out in 1845 on the Meek Cutoff. Thus Daniel Holman probably had the distinction of being the only person to have rescued sibling emigrants from two separate new Oregon wagon route disasters.¹¹

Coming northward the family of thirteen-year-old James Layton Collins finally reached the Eugene area on December 10, "after suffering incredibly toils, dangers and hardships." Here they met William Stilwell of Yamhill and another gentlemen "who informed us that the bottom lands of the Long Tom river were so flooded that they thought it impossible for us to reach the settlements with our wagons before the next summer; and that it was absolute madness to think of doing it during the winter, in the conditions we were in. ... I already knew our situation to be difficult and dangerous; but now I realized that it was becoming desperate--in fact, almost hopeless."¹²

Young Collins told of how one of the French traders who had brought flour out to the emigrants (see the December 11 entry, below) "was returning with a dozen ponies bearing empty packsaddles," and "for a few dollars and a plug of tobacco," he consented to carry seven members of the Collins family back to the settlements, together with their camping equipment, clothing, and bedding. Father Smith Collins and his thirteen-year-old boy James Layton Collins, were to have remained there to guard the rest of the families' belongings. The family would travel with the seven-member family of young Joe Turnedge from the Linville party, who had already hired pack horses for his family. Joe's little brother Harrison Turnedge, who was a good hunter, would stay with the two Collins' (along with a crippled old man named Samuel Ruth who could go no further), to help guard both families' equipment, until they could start home next spring.

It was later decided that the Collins father would take the family pony to the settlements to obtain some flour, but afterwards there was a tremendous snowstorm followed by a freeze, that rendered his returning before the last of February, 1847, all but impossible. Then the Turnedge boy became ill, putting the burden of doing all the hunting in the snow on the thirteen-year-old boy, James Layton Collins. He later wrote of staying out all night in the snow surrounded by coyotes, hunting for meat:

JAMES LAYTON COLLINS: I thought of my anxious and hungry comrades at that cabin; I thought of my father and my mother and my little

brothers and sisters, far away, whose faces I might never see again. There was heaviness at my heart, and a choking in my throat--and I must confess that the weary, lonesome little boy sobbed himself to sleep.

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December 11 – “The Frenchman and three [mixed-blood men] turned back in the morning: they are afraid if they go over the mountain, they will not get back this winter. I told Jean Baptiste that Mr. Beers expected that he would go with me to the kanyon, and that if he turned back, I could not go any further.” (Anson Beers of Salem had apparently lent his employee Baptiste for the relief effort.)

The remaining members of the relief parties had now reached what was a critical juncture for those emigrants mostly from the rear company, nearly all of whom were wagonless and many traveling on foot and still in the Umpqua Valley on the south side of the Calipooya Mountains. Their situation was much more precarious than their companions from the lead company, many of whom had made it through the canyon before the rains. After persuading Baptiste and Delore to continue southward -- by promising to pay them out of his own pocket -- Holt resumed his journey near Creswell Butte. This was just south of today’s Eugene, and north of Cottage Grove at the head of the Willamette Valley – at which point they started up the Calipooya Mountains.¹³

December 11 (*continued*) – “We came across four or five families encamped, about noon, at a butte in the prairie. These families could not get further without assistance. Mr. Goodman, Mr. Hutchins, and Mr. Howell stopped here to assist them in. We traveled 23 miles and camped at the foot of the mountain. There are three families here that are in a very bad situation; their teams having given out, and they have no provisions. Mr. Campbell let them have some flour. I feel for them; it is hard for me to pass them, but when I know there are other helpless families among hostile Indians; I am bound to go on and assist them.”

ANGELINE SMITH: It had been about three weeks since the two young men left the train to find the settlement. This memorable evening will never be forgotten as long as any of this company lives. It was late in the evening; the train was stopped for the night, and it was misting snow and they was unpacking the oxen, and the shivering and freezing children standing around waiting for the warm bed clothes to be taken off the backs of the oxen to cover up to keep warm until there could be a fire kindled.

The men was [sic] all out getting dry bark and wood to build a log-heap fire to dry and thaw out, and then to kill some poor old worn out cow for supper, when all at once the company was startled at the awflest yelling and hoorah, and they thought the Indians was coming to massacre them, and they ran to see, and they saw Uncle Henry Smith up on a big log with hat in his hand, swinging it over his head and yelling like a madman. They could not for a

while make out what [was] the matter with Uncle Henry, but by and by the government mule train came around in sight where they all could see, and to [their] overjoyed amazement, they realized help had come to their rescue; the boys had reached [the] settlement. Some were laughing, some cried, some shouted shrieks of joy when the well-loaded government mules come up well-loaded with provisions.

The old poor cow was not killed, but oh my, how hungry we all was, and how stingy we thought those government men was. They just put everything under a guard and just issued out just a small portion to each family, not half what they could eat, but, oh, it tasted so good. If they had of let them eat all they wanted, they would of died right there they was so hungry. For several days they were not allowed to have all they wanted.

Smith in using the term “government mules” probably thought the pack animals had been sent out by the territorial “government” as a result of “the “boys” – the two young men sent ahead for provisions earlier – having reached the settlement. Holt does not identify the large Smith party by name, and it is difficult to determine from Angeline Smith’s description on which side of the mountain pass this meeting with the relief party took place. Nor does she identify specifically her rescuers, saying only that this help resulted from “the boys having reached the settlements.” Smith does precede her account of this meeting with the statement that when they reached the Calipooya Mountains “it began to snow as it was the first of December,” which probably meant “the first *part of* December.”

Capt. Rice Dunbar, who had led the Smith party all the way from Missouri and who was apparently now traveling just behind them at this point, said of the young men they had sent forward earlier: “on the 12th day of December the men returned with some horses and flour.” The two men, Croizen and Boone, reported having received from Dr. McLoughlin six pack horses loaded with flour, and returning to their former traveling companions.¹⁴

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December 12 & 13 -- "Crossed the Calipooya mountains; saw the carcasses of a good many dead animals today--met one family at the top of the mountain packing -- met two families on south side of the mountain, just ready to take the mountain; they were almost afraid to try to cross--their cattle were worn out, and their provisions all gone. Mr. Campbell let them have some flour." The rescue party traveled a total of twenty-one miles and camped on a small creek.

December 14 – The rescuers traveled fifteen miles further and camped on Cabin Creek, near present-day Oakland. There they met the families of Ezekiel Kennedy, Reason Hall, Henry Croizen, and a Mr. Lovlen, “who have neither flour, meat, nor salt, and game is very scarce.” Baptiste killed two deer

and divided the meat among them, and Holt gave them fifty pounds of flour.

December 15 – The next day the rescuers swam across both Cabin and Calipooya Creeks, carrying their packs across on logs. James Campbell met his family here, as well as the families of Rev. Cornwall and Capt. Rice Dunbar. While Campbell was gone his “eldest daughter, Mary Campbell [age 13], had died during the trying weeks and almost every soul on the train was ill ... and when Mr. Campbell returned to meet the train after having reached the settlements, there was much rejoicing when plenty of food was again available and they knew at least that those remaining would likely be able to reach their destination.”¹⁵

There were not enough horses to take Mr. Cornwall's family back to the settlements, so the Campbells left nearly all their property with Cornwall, and then departed with the Dunbar party along with rescuers Harris and Jenkins. According to Joseph Cornwall, “Our hurder [sic] Mr. [Lorenzo] Byrd, went on with James Campbell [and his remaining family, back] to the Willamette to try to get help for us. And father sent some letters to friends asking for help. Mr. Byrd found a Middleton Simpson, an old friend of father's, on the Luckiamute. And he sent a sack of flour and a mule to help us on to the Willamette ...,” so apparently teamster Byrd did return later with these supplies. The Simpson brothers (who were no known relation to our Simpson cousins on the northern route) had come west over the 1845 Meek Cutoff and settled on the Big Luckiamute River on claims adjoining the Lewis family of “Lewisville,” where they operated a ferry on the Old Trappers' Trail.¹⁶

Meanwhile, Holt and the other rescuers traveled six miles that day and camped south of present-day Winchester, on the North Umpqua. On December, 16 they “[t]raveled 9 miles and camped near creek where Mr. Newton was killed by the Indians.” “This was Deer Creek [now Newton Creek] where it joins the South Umpqua at today's city of Roseburg.” December 17 – They then traveled ten miles up the South Umpqua River to Roberts Creek, and met the last families on the South Road -- those of John Baker, David Butterfield, David Townsend, James Townsend, and James Crump.

Now, only a week before Christmas in the dead of winter, having finally reached the last of the stranded South Road emigrants, Holt and who were left of his fellow rescuers were ready to start the long and difficult journey back to the settlements, accompanied by the last of the emigrants they had come to assist.