

Chapter Fifteen

Willamette Valley

It was getting to be very late in December and the new year 1847 was fast approaching. Holt and his fellow rescuers, had ventured nearly as far south as the terrible “canyon.” Then began the dauntless task of helping the last of the straggling South Road emigrants prepare for resuming their journey northward, joining their rescuers on their return trip back toward the settlements. On December 18, 1846, they spent all day making pack-saddles, and left Roberts Creek the next day. December 20 -- Troubles with Indians stealing their horses. December 21-- crossed North Fork of the Umpqua River. December 22 -- Snowed all day and made only five miles. December 23 -- Camped on Calipooya Creek and left wagons. December 24 -- Drowned two oxen swimming across overflowed river. December 25 -- Laid up--snowed all night. Holt made no mention of anyone celebrating Christmas that winter.

December 26 & 27 -- Traveled a mile and a half and camped on Cabin Creek near present-day Oakland, named for the place where Rev. Cornwall and others were stranded for the winter, and “in a very bad situation” -- Kennedy and Hall had had nothing to eat for four days. Holt bought three oxen from emigrant John Baker and distributed them for meat to the Kennedys, Halls, Croizens, and Cornwalls.

The Cornwall’s twenty-year-old cousin and driver Israel Stoley had volunteered to visit the Hudson’s Bay Company depot a day’s journey or two down the Umpqua. He returned just before the Cornwalls reached their winter camp, with a half bushel each of “peas” and “good clean wheat,” along with a handful of salt. (The similarity to the dried peas and whole-wheat Octavius Pringle had obtained earlier, helped establish the same “Old Ft. Umpqua” as the destination of both of them (see Chapter Thirteen).

The Rev. Joseph Cornwall’s party had set up a permanent camp on Cabin Creek, named later for the “cabin” that their party built there. According to Cornwall daughter Narcissa, the stranded emigrants were not able to move into the small cabin until sometime after Christmas. These eventual occupants included the Cornwall family of seven; Reason B. Hall’s family of eight (including twins born near the start of the journey); Henry Croizan, who married the oldest Hall girl en route and had gone forward for flour; the aged Ezekiel and Fanny Kennedy

with their grandson; and perhaps others, including the two remaining Cornwall drivers. There were at least two dozen persons in all.

The Rev. Cornwall made peace with the local Indians led by an English-speaking chief called "Capitan." These peaceful Indians left the emigrants' remaining cattle alone and taught them how to bake a wild root that tasted like sweet potatoes. The emigrants also had milk from the cows they had brought with them, and driver Stoley was often successful in hunting venison. Food was sparse through the winter, but Joseph Cornwall wrote "we were well insured against starvation," even with so many mouths to feed there in the wilderness.

On December 27 the rescue party laid over to dry their clothes, and on "the first clear day we have had since we left the settlements." Holt urged Cornwall to write a letter explaining their plight, which Holt would take forward into the settlements on his return. Highlights below are from Cornwall's letter to the editor which the *Spectator* didn't publish until March 4, 1847, probably owing to Holt's late arrival in the settlements.

JOSEPH CORNWALL: [I am writing] ... to arouse the sympathies of the good people of Oregon, in behalf of a small company of emigrants who are unable to cross the Callapoia mountains before sometime next season -- myself and a large family among them. We are not ... in a state of actual starvation yet, but of great want, and we do not know what the consequences will be, unless we receive some aid from the settlement, as soon as practicable.

We are in number about 25 or 30 souls, who are the last of the unfortunate ones who took the route to Oregon recommended by Mr. Applegate, and have lost nearly all our property, and almost every means of subsistence. And indeed, about one half of the company was just at the point of starvation, when Mr. Holt, (whose liberality we shall not forget) helped us to three tolerably good beeves. We have scarcely any flour or salt in the camp; and nothing in prospect but a little poor beef, and occasionally a poor venison--which is quite uncertain, for deer are very scarce, as well as very wild.

Cornwall closed by affirming that their condition was not due to their indolence as some had said, but rather to their not having been able to get over the Calipooya Mountains. And finally he requested that supplies be sent out as soon as the weather permitted.¹

December 28 — Holt continued: "This is very slow getting along as a consequence of having to pack oxen." December 29 to

January 1 -- Up and over the final obstacle -- the Calipooya Mountains -- snow three feet deep in places. They had cached some flour on the way out, and told of opening the cache as “our mouths water for some bread as we had been out for days.”

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According to family lore, the James Smith and John Long families were among the last emigrants to arrive in the settlements during 1846, in the same year they had started out. They arrived on December 31, in Polk County, between the two forks of the Luckiamute River, two weeks before Holt arrived near there on his return. It had been exceptionally cold and stormy that winter. The Smiths had virtually nothing to eat, and had only their wagon canvases to shelter them, which they had removed from the wagons they had been forced to leave back in the terrible Umpqua canyon disaster.

They arrived “during a terrible storm with fierce winds driving the snow with a vengeance. There was no place to stay and no wagon in which to sleep [as] the party lay upon the frozen ground, wrapped only in the canvas they had brought with them and spent their first night in this new land.”

Likewise, Capt. Rice Dunbar, who had led the James Smith party halfway across the country wrote:

DUNBAR: ... after enduring the most extreme hardships through mud and water we arrived in the settlements on the last day of December, completely used up -- without wagons, cattle, bedding or tools. But, yet I feel rich, when I look around and see all of my family well, and all of our neighbors healthy and enjoying good health, I feel more than compensated for our loss and privations.”

The last of the Smith’s close traveling companions who were still en route, were what was left of the James Campbell family, who arrived sometime in early January, 1847, after being nine months on the road. They eventually settled in the Waldo Hills area of Marion County. Their then 26-year-old driver J. H. Bridges, who had taken charge of the family while Campbell made his first trip to the settlements for provisions, later married the oldest surviving Campbell daughter Margaret, who was age twelve on the South Road.³

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Starting during early January, 1847, Holt traveled twenty-five miles in four days and camped at the Skinner house in present-day Eugene, where the James Layton Collins boy was staying the winter. January 8 – “Swam two creeks – women and children got wet and came very near freezing.” January 9 -- Crossed Long Tom swimming. January 10 -- Crossed Mary's river swimming. January 11 -- Camped on Soap Creek. “Mr. Butterfield was taken sick and stopped here.”

January 12 -- Camped on Luckiamute -- very stormy and cold. January 13-16 – Holt laid up here four days. Baptiste had traveled on January 14, crossed the Luckiamute, and one of his horses drowned. The James & David Townsend families (each of whom had babies born en route) were left by Baptiste at the forks of the Luckiamute.

January 17 -- Traveled seven miles and stopped to visit Black Harris, who had arrived earlier. Swam the Luckiamute below the forks. Here Holt apparently left the Old Trappers' Trail which he had followed on the way out, and turned due northward heading toward the present-day town of Rickreall. January 18 – Holt stayed at James Nesmith's recently acquired claim just west of present-day Highway 99-W, and three miles south of the Rickreall River.

January 19 – The horses were too stiff to travel, so Holt left the John Baker family there. Holt then took his best horse and got as far as today's town of Rickreall, when his horse gave out, so he took to walking. The Bakers were the last emigrant family mentioned by Holt as being accompanied into the settlements by the December rescue efforts.

January 21, 1847 – Holt finally arrived home at Jefferson on the east side of the Willamette.

HOLT: "... after having been gone fifty days, undergoing many privations and hardships, but I feel I have done no more than my duty. The public doubtless is aware of the humane object of our trip. It was to relieve our fellow beings who were suffering almost beyond description. As the painful news of their sufferings was not to be heard without prompting some of us to endeavor to relieve them as far as we could. We succeeded in relieving many who must [would otherwise] have perished. ... THOMAS HOLT."

Holt used the same “indescribable suffering” theme sounded by Samuel Parker in describing the Meek Cutoff emigrants arriving the year earlier – over a route on which they were probably more deaths than were suffered by the tragic Donner Party a year later. The 1846-47 Southern Route winter rescue effort by Holt and other concerned settlers – a few of them from the exploring party who had originally discovered

the route -- was truly an heroic enterprise that undoubtedly saved numerous lives. Yet it was performed entirely by a number of individuals acting on their own as a willing service to their fellow settlers, with no thought of compensation, and certainly at great hardship as well as personal sacrifice and risk.

Holt submitted with his letter a list of his out-of-pocket expenses totaling \$426.37 asking for individual donations to defray. These included mainly \$127.12 for food supplies; \$130 for stolen, dead and drowned horses; plus \$140 total paid to Baptiste Gardapie & Q. Delore for going with him on into the Umpqua Valley. Holt did not attempt to profit personally from the emigrants' misfortune by selling them provisions or even charging for his own rescue efforts.

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Scott had suggested upon his own arrival that, excepting those who wintered in the Umpqua Valley (at Cabin Creek) and also at the head of the Willamette (at Skinner's Butte), most of the emigrants had "reached the settlements in some way by a little after Christmas" -- which is, after all, very late in the year for emigrants who were told they would arrive by the first of October. For the last emigrant family their arrival was well into January -- January 19 to be precise -- nearly a full month after Christmas. Scott also failed to credit the efforts of the relief party members for the large number of emigrants having made it at all -- perhaps at least a hundred or more rescued men, women, and children -- who owed their lives to these heroic rescuers -- our Smith ancestors among them.

Although it was then well into 1847, the "1846" Southern Route immigration was still a long way from being over. There remained upwards of thirty or more emigrants who -- without wagons or food -- had given up on ever reaching the settlements in the same year they set out. As with their former Donner party traveling companions to the south, they too had been forced to "winter" somewhere along the route, and wait until the next spring to enter the settlements, when the terrain was again fit for travel.

The first of these to be rescued the next year was James Layton Collins, whose father, Smith Collins, came in late February to retrieve his thirteen-year-old son and his companions. The father had started out as soon as the river waters had receded sufficiently for him to reach

Skinner's cabin on a butte in today's Eugene. Together father and son arrived back at the Luckiamute River on March 5, 1847, where the valiant young boy was reunited with his family.

Lastly, yet another thirteen-year-old boy on the trail, Joseph H. Cornwall, later in life wrote this poignant recollection of the welcomed spring arrival of a small rescue party which had come in response to his father's earlier pleas for aid and assistance. The party comprised three settlers from Yamhill County -- Joseph Hess, Clark Rogers, and Josiah Nelson -- who came to the rescue of the more than two-dozen emigrants who had wintered in the makeshift cabin they built at what came to be known as Cabin Creek:

JOSEPH H. CORNWALL: April came at last with its warm sun, its gentle breeze and pretty flowers. And that all made us restless to go forward and finish our journey, our journey to the Willamette, our day-dream for many months.

Sure enough, on the 9th day of April our friends from the Willamette came at about 10:00 A.M., and I need not say that we were glad. ... Mr. Hess brought us two yokes of oxen, also flour, sugar, coffee, salt and bacon. By noon mother and sister Lizzie had an old time dinner on the table. And we began to prepare to leave next day

It was just a year since we had left our old home in Arkansas. But we started with glad hearts. Capitan and Jo, his sub-chief, came to say good-by. Father gave his cabin to Capitan, and I will always remember him as a noble Indian, a good friend, honest and reliable.

We went a short day's journey and camped. Next day we crossed the Calapooia Mountain and reached the Willamette Valley. We passed down the valley on the west side over the sites where the towns of Cottage Grove, Eugene, Corvallis and Dallas now are, and it is hard to realize that it was all a wilderness then. But so it was.

We passed down the Chelahem Valley where the parties lived, who rescued us. And then we were at the end of our journey to Oregon.