

Chapter Seventeen

Polk Settlements

In the course of doing the research necessary to investigate and compile the many aspects of various routes included in this story, during especially difficult times I found it most helpful to visit one of the several Polk County gravesites of my early Oregon Trail ancestors, to pay my respects and engage them in silent communication. While contemplating with them the hardships they had overcome in completing their heroic journey, I would draw from them the encouragement I needed to continue assembling their story.

It is difficult to describe the feeling I had standing there re-establishing my connection to these trail pioneers – it felt like coming home after being gone for a very long time. I sensed that they somehow knew what I was doing there in Polk County – recalling the forgotten memory of their story -- and that they were encouraging me to continue on, just as they had been encouraged to not give up during especially difficult parts of their own earlier overland journey.

During the actual writing of the story, I would often get so involved in the details of their adventure, that I would find myself transported back in time, to where it would seem I was toiling right there alongside them on one of the routes, actually undergoing the hardships they endured in reaching the settlements.

More than once I was reminded of something I had read about how certain “memorable” experiences are recorded in the unconscious and then passed down in genetic material to future generations, as a means of species’ survival. I often wondered if perhaps I might have inherited from these early trail pioneers their poignant memories of how they had overcome great adversity, and ultimately stuck with it until they had reached their goal. Was the early Oregon Trail actually “in my blood,” as they say – inherited from all four of my dad’s grandparents? It often felt that way, especially when I visited one of the three cemeteries in which my trail ancestors lay resting. I had the eerie feeling I was part of their family, and that they knew I belonged right there alongside them.

Researching and compiling this story proved to be a labor of love that arrived at a perfect time in my life (as most important things do). I am indeed blessed to have come upon this remarkable story while still able to follow where it led, and thus fulfill what had become my own manifest destiny. Reconstructing this story has enabled me to more fully appreciate the importance family roots play in finding one’s place in the great flow of life.

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James B. Riggs' at Salt Creek

From Linnton, on the west shore of the Willamette River, where northeast Portland sits today, the Old Trappers' Trail to California used by Hudson's Bay Company trappers, wound through the Tualatin Mountains by way of Cornelius (or Logie) Pass. This brought travelers onto the "Tualatin Plains," and from there southward along the west side of the Willamette Valley.

The strongest evidence that our Riggs ancestors came down this Old Trappers' Trail is provided by where these 1845 emigrants eventually settled. Meek Cut-off emigrants such as the Ownbeys and the Kings, who settled in present-day Benton County very near its eventual Polk County border; the Waymires, who settled not far south of the Riggs'; plus others who traveled the regular route in 1845, such as the McTimmonds' and the David Lewis', who settled in southern Polk County; and then the Riggs' claim on Salt Creek, which abutted the three claims of the Applegate brothers (from the 1843 wagon train) -- all these emigrants had settled very close to the Old Trappers' Trail -- for the obvious reason that as the main artery through the settlements the "Trail" provided convenient access to their claims.

Abraham Henry Garrison, who traveled through Polk County coming from the south on the 1846 wagon train over the "Southern Route," told in his reminiscences of wending his way north past Mary's River and Corvallis, in Benton County, and then crossing the Luckiamute River and then Rickreall Creek, both in Polk County. He finally arrived at Salt Creek, where Garrison stayed in the house of James B. Riggs, before resuming his journey north.

An article appearing in the *Overland Journal* probably referring to J. B. Riggs, whose claim abutted the claim of Jesse Applegate, quotes Garrison as saying that: "An Emigrant of 1845 told me, that when he got to Polk County, (or rather) we got in that Neighborhood he went to Jesse Applegate to get a beef animal for his family, he offering to make rails for the beef, having no money. Applegate refused him, saying he must have the money for his beef."

Because this description of an 1845 emigrant fits our ancestor J. B. Riggs in all respects, and because Garrison probably did spend the night with the Riggs (not "Ruggs," as stated) family in the late fall of 1846 at Salt Creek, it is likely that the unnamed source was the same J. B. Riggs. This would be even more likely had Riggs exhausted all of his available funds getting his ailing driver James Field cared for, and bringing all his family with five wagonloads of equipment and belongings to the new Riggs family claim at Salt Creek, which we know abutted the claim of Jesse Applegate (as discussed in Chapter Thirteen).

Chronicler James Field's later comments testify to his ongoing good relationship with the Riggs family, having twice visited their home at Salt Creek before returning to New York, and twice entrusting to Riggs his precious journal, concerning which Field apparently had some awareness of its potential historical value. Field was mentioned later by Levi Scott as being in a party of fifteen men

raised by Scott in December, 1847, at the request of Governor Abernathy of the Provisional Government of Oregon, in retaliation against the Cayuse Indians for the November 29, 1847, Whitman massacre at the Wailtpu Missionary Station on the Walla Walla River.¹

In January, 1848, this company was dispatched southward along this same Old Trappers' Trail, to the military governor of the newly acquired Territory of California, requesting his assistance in this effort. In crossing over the Siskiyou Mountains in snow three to five feet deep, Field was described as being a "large, heavy man," who was said to have kept sinking down through the snow on his snow-shoes. This provides a clue perhaps as to how Field was able to overcome the fever that kept him delirious for so long at the end of the 1845 Meek Cut-off, and otherwise claimed the lives of so many other less hearty souls. According to John Minto's account of the same incident, Field weighed 210 pounds, which was probably a very big man in those times.² Right afterward Field returned to his family's home in New York.

FIELD: When I returned here overland in the spring of '48 I deposited the diary with Capt. J. B. Riggs, of Polk county, and when I returned to Oregon in '50, finding that he had used the blank leaves in the book to keep his business accounts on, I left it with him [again]. If it is still my property, and I know of no reason why it should not be - please hand it to the Society of Pioneers, of Oregon.

James B. Riggs must have been quite the entrepreneur, having built the first dry goods store (at Salt Creek – there is a convenience market there yet today by the same name of Salt Creek Store) and the first hotel in Dallas, the Polk County seat. He is said to have been the largest real estate owner in Polk County when he died in 1870. It seems fitting that the blank pages of what is perhaps the single most valuable diary we have of this important 1845 crossing were used by Riggs to keep his business accounts there at his family home on "Enterprise Road" in Salt Creek -- a road name undoubtedly supplied by the "enterprising" Riggs himself. The Riggs family had one more son, born there at Salt Creek, James B. Riggs, Jr.³

(It is interesting to recall here that Southern Route chronicler J. Quinn Thornton had lived for a time in Salt Creek on a claim adjacent to that of the J. B. Riggs family. Field depositing his journal of the 1845 migration with the Riggs family meant that two of the most important accounts of the twin disasters of the 1845 Meek Cut-off and the 1846 Southern Route – by Field and Thornton respectively – had been kept within a stone's throw of one another, although perhaps not at the same time.)

Finally, we have Field's modest last words concerning the one document -- the James Field diary recorded by this Riggs family teamster -- which has provided history with the most detailed information about this important 1845

migration, and Stephen Meek's failed attempt at opening what could have become the first ever new "overland" wagon route into the Willamette Valley, by traveling through Central Oregon:

FIELD: It was written up daily after all my other duties as teamster and general assistant about the camp were performed. It has never been revised by me, and I hope my old companions will overlook any errors I have made.

Your friend, JAMES FIELD

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Absalom Smiths at Smithfield

In chronicler McBride's account about finally separating tearfully from his close traveling companions "Smith and Wilson" in Oregon City, he speaks of their arriving in the Willamette Valley in "the closing days of September." This is only the third time since departing Missouri that McBride supplied a date (almost) with which to place his narrative in a timeframe. But it is the most important date, because McBride's stated arrival probably at the Absalom J. Hembree settlements in Yamhill County enabled us to work backwards to their very likely having arrived at The Dalles on Sunday, September 13, to actually pinpoint the likely arrivals dates of these travelers. Using the elapsed days and named days of the week McBride also supplied, we reconstructed the movement of the Simpson company on the route from The Dalles over the Barlow Road in 1846. It also enabled us to deduce our Absalom Smith ancestor's family likely September 30 final arrival date at their eventual home in what came to be known as "Smithfield," in northern Polk County:

Arrived at The Dalles on Sabbath day, Sunday, September 13; started over Barlow Road, September 14; met Hembree & Gray with fresh teams for McBrides on third day, September 16; arrived at Foster's (McSwain's) Farm in eight more days, September 24; arrived at Oregon City in two more days, September 26 (thirteen travel days from the start); McBrides, Burnetts, Simpsons, Smiths & Wilsons, separated, September 27; McBrides likely arrived at Hembree Yamhill settlement in two more days, September 28; likely arrival of the Smith & Wilson party in northern Polk County two days after that, September 30. This itinerary places the Simpson company on the Barlow Road between September 14 and 26. The feasibility of this September 26 Oregon City arrival date for the Simpson company was verified by comparing the elapsed time of the Simpson company from Ft. Hall to The Dalles, with that of Joel Palmer in 1845 and Orus Brown in 1846 – the difference being only one or two days.

We may never know for certain which was the first full company to come over the Barlow Road in 1846. The information available does indicate that

the Ben Simpson-led company was certainly among the forefront of those coming over the route in its first year of operation. Our Absalom & Hiley Kimsey Smith ancestors continued from Oregon City on down the Old Trappers' Trail to a place that came to be known as "Smithfield," arriving there probably on September 30, 1846. (Ironically, our Absalom Smith ancestors had arrived in the settlements by the October 1 arrival date Jesse Applegate had given our James Smith ancestors for arriving over the Southern Route.) This Smithfield claim would become the Absalom Smith family's new Polk County home for many years to come. They had one more daughter and son born at Smithfield: Emily Francis and Samuel Thurston Smith – six children in all.

This Absalom Smith claim is now a large part of Baskett Slough National Wildlife Refuge, and can best be viewed from a winery off of Smithfield Road, which runs between highways 99-W and 22. John M. Wilson's wife Huldah Kimsey probably died somewhere en route, we know not where or why. Wilson eventually took a 320 acre DLC (Donation Land Claim) allotted to single claimants, located in a large Smith and Kimsey "enclave" cloistered around the families' Smith-Brown Cemetery, off of Highway 223. Wilson's two daughters were later raised by the family of Absalom's brother, Ira Perry Smith, who migrated in 1847 with a third brother, Doc Smith.⁴

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James Smiths at Lewisville

Owing to Angeline Smith (Crews) later recollections, we know that the large James Smith party struggled somewhere in the vicinity of the Calipooya Mountains sometime during the first (part) of December, 1846. This was likely around December 12, judging from Holt's account of the other families he reached on his rescue effort into the Umpqua Valley. In describing his later rescue activities, Holt did go on to name the emigrant families he found and aided after he entered into the Umpqua Valley further south of what we presumed was his likely meeting with the Smith party. Those named included *all* of the families who are known to have been previously traveling alongside the Smith party, as well as those believed to have been traveling behind them.

Because of Holt's glaring omission of even mentioning this very large Smith party (consisting of nearly three-dozen persons), combined with their known eventual arrival date in the settlements on December 31, it appears likely the Smiths may have worked their way toward the forefront of the wagonless and leaderless Dunbar rear "company," which by then was in complete disarray. This would have brought the Smith party somewhere into the vicinity of the Calipooya Mountains sometime before December 12 – perhaps even over these mountains where they may have been helped by those Holt-party rescuers who

turned back at that point, on December 11. We may never know for certain, but at least the information available does provide a reasonably good general idea of where the Smith party was in mid-December, and how they may have fared during that crucial rescue month. How they actually got from the Umpqua Valley to their eventual home between the two branches of the Luckiamute River remains unknown – but the two to three weeks elapsed time is entirely plausible.

We do know from Smith (Crews') account and other sources (including especially cousin Sarah Hunt Steeves) that the families of Capt. Henry Smith and William Smith's widow Ellen Skidmore arrived in the Salem area on December 23, and went on to eventually settle in Aumsville and West Stayton, respectively. The two families of the brothers James and Henry Smith had apparently separated somewhere along the way, but we know not how or why. This separation is curious however, given that the brothers were married to sisters. Perhaps it had something to do with the origins of the rescuers who may have assisted them in reaching the settlements. According to Smith (Crews), "uncle" Henry Smith looked after the widow Ellen Smith's large family all their lives. He went on to gain prominence as an Oregon state senator, serving in the 1880s.

We also know from family records that the James Smiths arrived over the Southern Route on December 31, a full three months behind the Absalom Smiths September 30 arrival at Smithfield using the Barlow Road. The James Smiths settled on what became known as "Smith" Road in "Lewisville," named for the Lewis families who came over the regular route in 1845 from Louisville, Kentucky. The Smith and Lewis families and their descendants were the main occupants of this small town for nearly a full century, the oldest Smith son John H. marrying Martha Jane Lewis in 1850 and taking a DLC next to his father. The James Smiths had three more children born in Lewisville: daughters Louisa Evaline and Rachael Henrietta, with son Francis Marion born in between.

Ironically, Smith neighbor John Chamberlain had traveled north from California with his new John Hess's family in-laws. In May, 1846, they had warned the South Road Exploring Party against trying to bring wagons through the narrow Umpqua Canyon. Soon after arriving in southern Polk County in June, 1846, and establishing a 640-acre claim on the Little Luckiamute River, John Chamberlain and Nancy Hess divorced and she left. Sometime around 1850 Chamberlain married his then nineteen-year-old neighbor, Mariah Smith, daughter of James Smith (that year was popular for marrying to qualify for receiving the benefits of an additional 320 acres of spousal land as part of new the 1850 Donation Land Claim Act). In early 1847, the Smiths had taken a claim located downstream from Chamberlain, after losing their wagons and all their belongings while coming through the same canyon that Chamberlain and his Hess traveling companions had warned against bringing wagons.⁵

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John Longs in Douglas County

While researching this story I would often travel to one obscure place or another, frequently ending up discovering something important that I had no idea I would be finding there. However, none of these journeys of discovery quite matched the fortuitous timing of the fateful encounter that occurred very early on in my research.

About one month after I learned of my ancestor's involvement in the early Oregon Trail, on Feb 8, 1997, I accompanied my trail mentor to tiny Scottsburg, Oregon, the Umpqua River town Levi Scott had founded in 1850. The occasion was the celebration of the 200th anniversary of Scott's birth. Fate had seated a fellow South Road descendant named Robert Long (born 1920) and me at the same table. As we both knew that Scott had played a pivotal role in leading the route's surviving emigrant families safely into the Willamette Valley under very trying circumstances, my new acquaintance and I soon joked about neither of us being there had it not been for Levi Scott.

Upon hearing my surname, Robert Long casually mentioned that his great-grandmother on the Scott-led Southern Route had been a Smith -- "isn't everybody?" -- we laughed again. As I was as yet unfamiliar with the entire party of my Smith ancestors on that route, I asked him to jot down the name of Minerva Jane Smith for me to research later -- just in case. A few weeks later, I discovered in one of our families' historical records a mention of my ancestor Elizabeth Smith and "a Mrs. Long, also in the party," having been forced to sadly discard their feather beds to lighten the load in trying to get their wagons through the terrible Umpqua Canyon. It turned out that his great-grandmother was a half-sister of my great-grandfather, George Washington Smith, and that Robert Long and I shared the same great-great-grandfather, James Smith.

Around the same time Levi Scott was founding Scottsburg in 1850, John and Minerva Jane Smith Long were migrating southward from the Polk County settlements, along with the three Applegate brothers. The Longs took a Donation Land Claims amidst the various Applegate families, who had settled in the Yoncala area and southward toward Oakland. I later visited my third-half-cousin Robert Long his wife Frieda in the historic house where he was born and raised on the original Long family DLC on John Long Road in Douglas County, Oregon. The Longs filled me in on his ancestors from the Long family bible and other records, and showed me many family pictures and memorabilia. Among these was an old pie case made by neighbor and new in-law, Jesse Applegate, as a wedding present to his daughter Sallie, upon her 1873 marriage to the Longs' eldest son. This son, John James Long -- named for his father "John" Long and maternal grandfather "James" Smith -- had been born in Polk County in 1848, after the 1846 emigrants' arrival there and before the Long family migrated southward with the Applegate brothers' families in 1849-50.⁶ Another son,

Henry Clay Long, had likewise married Sallie Applegate's sister Flora in 1874.

The John Long family had apparently remained sufficiently friendly with the Applegates during the few years after the Southern Route to have migrated with them from the Polk County settlements to Douglas County. This was curious, given that there had been so much animosity directed toward Jesse Applegate by South Road emigrants, many of whom had held him responsible for enticing them onto the route, and then abandoning them to build the road for themselves. Regrettably, I was never able to determine the exact circumstances under which the John Long family migrated from Lewisville to Douglas County with the Applegate brothers' families – other than the fact that they had all been neighbors back in Missouri in the years prior to the first large Oregon Trail migration in 1843, when the Applegate brothers departed for Oregon.

In a final bit of trail irony, my Smith surname through which cousin Robert Long and I connected did not derive from our common James Smith ancestor, but rather from the Absalom Smith side of my family. Thus meeting my Long cousin was doubly fortuitous, and proved to be a crucial element in enabling me to identify most all of our family members who had traveled over the South Road in 1846 in the large Smith/Long party, and discover what eventually became of them and their descendants after they reached the settlements. Having occurred at the very beginning of my research, I often looked back at this fateful meeting as an omen of my being guided along on my own Oregon Trail journey of discovery. Shortly before Robert Long's death, I had the honor and privilege of showing my newfound trail cousin and his sister our mutual great-great grandfather's final Polk County resting place.