

Chapter Three

James B. Riggs'

*“Capt. Riggs with all his teams and men –
‘Marched up a hill and then marched down again.’”**

*Chronicler James Field¹

The main theme of the story I ended up researching and writing was centered around my dad’s three grandparents’ families each trying a different proposed new overland wagon route in its inaugural year during 1845 and 1846. However, I did not recognize the full significance of these three new routes at the end of the Oregon Trail – especially their connection to one another -- until some time after I became involved in researching the story. This “connection” ended up being what made the story about what happened to our ancestors’ families during those early years on the trail a tale worth telling.

These three new “branches” of the Oregon Trail all consisted of new wagon routes over the Cascade Mountains in which three of my dad’s different grandparents’ families participated. They were significant mainly because they were intended to serve the common purpose of bringing covered wagons into the valley settlements for the first time ever. In addition, there were other new routes -- so-called “short-cuts” -- that were presented to the emigrants along the way. These are discussed here also, to present the complete story of how the emigrants were confronted with many choices of various routes to follow, especially during these two important years of trail development and expansion. How these various early decisions may have affected the choices they made later as they neared the final Cascade Mountain barrier, and how this shaped their eventual destiny – for better or for worse -- is the essence of the story.

As I delved further into these three separate stories, I was struck most of all by the differences between the way in which the various new routes and short cuts were presented to the emigrants – not just by their discoverers or promoters -- but also by other mountain men who were familiar with the territory, or even by other emigrants who had previously used at least one of the short cuts.

For example, The Greenwood (or Sublette) Cut-off was the first of these new routes encountered by emigrants as they entered into the Oregon Territory for the first time. This new route had been first discovered fifteen years earlier, in 1830 by local mountaineers William Sublette, Jedediah Smith, and David Jackson (of “Jackson Hole” fame). The route was generally presented to emigrants as a short cut that would save several days travel time, at the expense of causing ox teams to become rather jaded due to pulling wagons a considerable distance across a sparse desert without benefit of water and grass.

First used by emigrants of the Elisha Stevens party in the 1844 migration, the route was later named for octogenarian Caleb Greenwood, a local mountain man and fur trapper who had guided the Stevens party all the way from Council Bluffs, Iowa, in that year. Upon his telling his charges of this new 25-mile short-cut which would save as much as eighty miles and five to six days of travel, the Stevens party voted to try it, with favorable results in that first year of the route's use by emigrant wagons.

In discussing the Simpson Company's rejection of the Greenwood Cut-off in 1846, chronicler McBride had said that: "all the mountain men warned us against taking this route, and tales of suffering and disaster were [recounted] to us by those who had gone that way. It shortened the distance many miles, but was perilous to slow moving ox teams of emigrants." Yet despite McBride's admonition, the route did prove to be a perfectly plausible alternative that apparently saved several days travel time for many emigrants in both 1845 and 1846, with no record of any so-called "disaster."

Then, in regard to the next short cut presented to emigrants first in 1846 – the Hastings Cut-off -- McBride recalled that the brother of mountain man William Sublette had told them that "it was an impracticable route for teams, and if they attempted it, would lead to disaster." McBride then followed up on this recollection with his own personal observation made later in his life that Sublette's "predictions, however, were erroneous; for Hastings, having *induced* some 60 wagons to follow his leadership, piloted them safely through his proposed route to California."

What struck me as curious about McBride's apparent defense of Hastings' new route was his use of the word "induced" in describing how its discoverer had presented his route to emigrants for the first time. Was McBride suggesting that Hastings had been attempting to somehow "entice" emigrants onto his short cut for some purely selfish, personal reason? I recalled how mountain man James Clyman, who had just traveled with Hastings over his new route, had warned the Donner party against using it, in no uncertain terms – to no avail. Yet Mrs. George Donner was the only one in that party who had thought that in touting his new shortcut, Lansford Hastings had perhaps been "probably some selfish adventurer."

Then McBride went on to point out how these various warnings about using the Hastings Cut-off proved to be "erroneous." This left me with the nagging thought that certain emigrants may have been "enticed" into taking certain perhaps highly questionable new routes by various possibly unscrupulous individuals acting from maybe some selfish, ulterior motives. This lingering thought was reinforced several times as I dug deeper into the story.

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1845

The full story of the all-out search for a suitable new wagon route over the Cascade Mountains at the end of the Oregon Trail – and the role my dad’s three grandparents’ families had played in that effort -- actually began unfolding back in the year 1845 -- one year before the families of our two Smith ancestors left Missouri and crossed the Continental Divide in the large migration of 1846. In this prior year yet another of our ancestor families came west by covered wagons over the Oregon Trail out of St. Joseph, Missouri, in a huge 1845 wagon train that was even larger than that of the 1846 migration which succeeded it. Here’s how the story began, according to chronicler James Field:

FIELD: Weston, Platte Co., Wed., April 16, '45, -- Got under way this day at 12 m. Took the road to St. Joseph; went about 9 miles, and camped.

James Field, Jr., heavy set and weighing over two hundred pounds, was a very big man back in those times. This strapping youth of twenty-two years, Field was also well educated and already a highly dependable kind of man for his young years. Unlike two other prominent chroniclers of the 1846 migration -- underage wagon driver John R. McBride and non-driver J. Quinn Thornton – James Field was the perfect specimen of the type of teamster a family would want to hire to assure themselves that he would lead their wagons through to their destination – a kind of insurance policy that he would get them through. If there ever was a teamster with all the attributes necessary to fulfill that obligation, James Field would have been an easy first choice of just about any trail family.

Field had hired on as a driver for the first of what were likely five wagons of the James B. Riggs family. His pay was the typical trail currency -- “room and board” given in lieu of money, a dry place to sleep and meals he would eat at the “family table.” As a teamster, Field had become a temporary “full member” of the Riggs family for the duration of the journey, to share all the joy and any adversity of the experience. When Field’s duties around the camp were over at the end of each day he kept a detailed daily journal of this overly large 1845 migration -- a diary that was perhaps the most complete and informative record of the several diaries kept that year.

The Riggs party for whom chronicler Field drove was headed by acting **Capt. James B. Riggs**, forty-three, and his wife Nancy Anderson, who was a year younger. They brought their entire family, starting with their twenty-year-old twins Milton and Hannah Jane, the latter accompanied by her husband James Allen and their baby Cyrus; the next four Riggs boys: Rufus, Marion, Washington and Silas, ages from seventeen down to nine; and lastly, their two youngest girls: Mary Louise, age six, and her three-year-old sister, Silbey Ann (Annie) Riggs, who would one day become my dad’s paternal grandmother.

When the swollen spring rivers had subsided sufficiently for wagons to cross them, and the grass had grown tall enough to provide forage for the oxen along the way, the company commanders gave the order to start the wagons

rolling. According to teamster James Field, the Riggs party left on May 2, 1845, from St. Joseph, Missouri, the nearer of the two “jumping-off” points for the trail. The emigrants came out of Missouri that year in two divisions of nearly 1000 souls each, traveling in a total of over 450 wagons from the two locations, Independence and St. “Joe.” With nearly 2000 emigrants in all they were by far the largest migration to date headed west from Missouri – over twice as large as the two previous years’ migrations of 1843 and 1844. In fact, this huge 1845 migration was larger than all the previous Oregon Trail migrations combined!

The St. Joseph Division in which our Riggs ancestors traveled, was piloted by John Clark, a local trader, who had been hired by the foremost two companies to guide them as far as “Burnett's Trace” – also known as “Independence Road.” This was the main road between Independence, Missouri, and Ft. Laramie, in the present-day state of Wyoming, named for Peter Burnett, one of the leaders of the first “great migration” to Oregon two years earlier in 1843.

FIELD: Mon. May 12.--Today went about 6 miles, crossing both forks of the Nimeha, and camping near the west one. A meeting was here called to decide whether our pilot [John Clark], who had been employed only to pilot us to Burnet's trace, as the road from Independence to Ft. Larimie [Laramie] is called, and who now informed us we were within 4 miles of it, should now be employed to go on to Fort Larimie with us or not. He had been employed to Burnet's trace for \$30, and we now engaged him to go on with us for \$100 more to Fort Larimie, which sum was raised by voluntary subscription. ...

The St. Louis Division, which had debarked from the further-distant Independence, Missouri, departure point chose as their guide, one **Stephen Meek**, who in 1842 had piloted the very first small wagon train to Oregon. There was no doubt Stephen Meek was a well-qualified pilot, and besides he was asking only \$1 per wagon for what looked like fewer than 250 wagons. This was less than half the \$500 his one competitor was asking, to guide them all the way to distant Ft. Hall, which was all the way inside the Oregon Territory.

At that point the two divisions were fully organized and underway, guided by pilots Clark and Meek, respectively. There was a near-even count of 228 wagons with 954 emigrants from St. Joe, and 223 wagons with 1008 emigrants from Independence. If most all of them got there, this huge influx of emigrants would result in more people entering the Oregon Territory than the entire non-native population residing there at the time -- showing how significant this 1845 wagon train would be to the territory.²

After “laying up” all day Wednesday, May 14, the St. Joe group reached the Little Blue River, and followed it northwesterly toward the Platte River in today's Nebraska. In the ten days from May 15 through May 24, the Riggs party made 157 miles, an average of over fifteen miles per day over relatively flat land -- on two of those days making at least twenty miles per day. On May 17 their company's leader Capt. William T'Vault resigned, many emigrants having been dissatisfied with his leadership, and James McNary was appointed to replace

him. On May 18 Steven Meek, the soon-to-be-forty-year-old guide of the St. Louis Division, after only a three day courtship married an orphaned “English spinster,” Elizabeth Schoonover, two days past her eighteenth birthday.³

FIELD: Sun. May 25.--Gathered up the oxen as soon after daylight as possible, and went five miles, to Platte river, where we camped for the day. This stream bears a close resemblance to the Missouri river, only its bottom has much less timber in it, has few snags, and never overflows its banks, although they are always full. During the afternoon, the small company in our rear from Independence passed, in two divisions, they having split through.

The very wide and shallow Platte (or Nebraska) River and its North Platte source -- together with the North Platte's westernmost Sweetwater tributary -- formed the waterway backbone of the initial part of the Oregon Trail, which emigrants followed nearly all the way to the Oregon Territory. This continuous, sustaining water source flowed almost from the Continental Divide across present-day Wyoming and Nebraska, and then emptied into the Missouri River. Its name is derived from the French “plat” meaning “flat,” or “Nebraska,” from the Oto Indian name likewise meaning “flat water.” At the place where the emigrants crossed it, the river was one-half-mile wide!

During the twelve days from May 26 through June 6, the Riggs party had made fairly good time, traveling 158 miles at an average rate of thirteen plus miles per day -- including laying over the better part of three days searching for cattle that had strayed during thunderstorms. Around the start of June, near the place where the North and South Platte Rivers converge to form the main waterway, Field wrote of it being “very evident throughout our journey that we could get along much easier in smaller companies.” This resulted in the McNary company splitting into three smaller groups which traveled one-half day apart. The splitting was done amicably, to afford greater maneuver-ability and ease of handling. These smaller units were commanded by John Waymire with eleven wagons, McNary with thirty wagons, and my dad’s great-grandfather James B. Riggs leading twenty-five wagons.⁴

Upon reaching the place where the South Platte, which had been running parallel to the North Platte, now turned southward, the companies crossed over it to begin moving northwesterly, then following the course of the North Platte. Emigrant William Goulder recalled seeing the shallow river bottom and adjacent hills completely covered with migrating buffalo (actually bison) as far as the eye could see, making this half-mile river crossing additionally hazardous.⁵

FIELD: Tues. June 10.--Lay in camp today, recruiting, as the cattle had become jaded and many of them lame. It is a singular fact that the working cattle's feet stand better than the loose stock, for, whilst numbers of the latter have become lame, and so much so as to compel us to leave them, but few of the working cattle have exhibited any signs of lameness.

When they got underway again, a young girl of thirteen passed under the wheel of the Riggs party's lead wagon Field was driving, and was seriously injured. Field expressed obvious relief in observing the next day that she was "in a fair way to recovery;" while remonstrating about the children and how he "had expected it during the whole journey, from their habitual carelessness in getting in and out whilst the wagons were in motion."

Proceeding on up the North Platte from June 11 through June 19, they made 126 miles over nine days, traveling at a good average speed of fourteen miles per day. These open level plains were where the emigrants' wagons could really make time. On June 14 they passed "The Chimney" – "a pillar of soft sandstone and clay, about eighty feet high, standing upon a pyramidal-shaped mound about 200 feet tall, making The Chimney top nearly 300 feet above the level of the river." The Riggs company entered into present-day Wyoming around June 18, and two days later reached Ft. Laramie about noon.

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The emigrants had then come slightly over 600 miles from St. Joe, and still had over two-thirds of the journey left to go. From June 21 through July 3, they followed the North Platte out of Ft. Laramie, going 154 miles at an average of almost twelve miles per day with three layovers. This translated into over fifteen plus miles per day in actual travel time.

FIELD: Fri., July 4.--We went about 11 miles; country of the same character as yesterday. A company of five mountain traders camped with us last night, and we intend traveling together to Fort Bridger, they acting as pilots for us.

It was Independence Day, and John Clark had piloted the St. Joseph companies only as far as Ft. Laramie, in accordance with their May 12 agreement. So these five otherwise unidentified mountain men apparently coming from Ft. Laramie had agreed to pilot the emigrants to Ft. Bridger, in a union of mutual convenience -- the emigrants providing protection in number.

FIELD: Sat., July 5.--... About ten miles from our former camp struck and crossed Sweetwater River at a large rock on its northern side, called Independence Rock, from the circumstance of Capt. [William] Sublette with a party of men celebrating the 4th of July there. There are hundreds of names cut and painted on the rock by persons passing it. We here entered the narrow valley of the Sweetwater, which leads on toward the pass between two low ranges of mountains, and soon after met the U. S. Dragoons returning from the pass, they having camped one night in Oregon. Near our camp is one of the wildest-looking places yet seen, called the Devil's Gate. The Sweetwater, after riding through a narrow, alluvial bottom, passes through a ridge of perpendicular rock 120 feet high, the chasm being about three rods [fifty feet] wide, and the water roaring as it struggles among the loose rock at the bottom like a cataract.

Having left the North Platte and passed the Independence Rock milestone on July 5, traveling down the Sweetwater valley the new Riggs company was right on schedule. On July 11 they met a small company of settlers who were returning from Oregon and California. These were mainly 1844 immigrants who had departed the Willamette Valley on April 19th on their way to the states “for the purpose of bringing out their families and friends the following year.” They had many questions about the states, including who was the new president, and were told James Knox Polk had been elected on his “54-40 or Fight!” expansionist platform.

One of these east-bound travelers, John Shively, attempted to dissuade the emigrants from taking the regular long way around through Ft. Bridger, which he had taken when he came west in the 1843 migration. Instead he told them they could save at least 100 miles by taking the “Greenwood Cut-off” between the Sandy and the Bear Rivers, which had been opened the year before.

Shively also planted the seeds of a possible new route into the Willamette Valley, in telling of mountain man, Moses “Black” Harris, and Indian Sub-Agent Dr. Elijah White, the original leader of the 1842 wagon train, who were looking for a road directly across central Oregon to the Cascade Mountains. This new hoped-for route would follow the Malheur River westward from the Snake, and cross over a depression in the mountain to the headwaters of the Santyam River, an eastern branch of the “Wilhamet.” If successful, the new route would shorten the journey by perhaps three hundred miles, and allow emigrants to bring their wagons all the way over the Cascades and directly into the Willamette Valley. White apparently made this exploration in July, 1845, but failed in finding the new route.⁷

On his way east, Shively told of meeting the various companies of the entire 1845 western migration on the following days: July 8, Capt.’s Thompson and McNary; July 11, Riggs and Tetherow; July 12, Hiram Smith; July 13, Presley Welch and Jacob Snyder; July 14, Joel Palmer, John Howell, and Sam Barlow; and the rest on succeeding days.

On July 12, the Riggs company finally crossed over the Continental Divide and entered into the Oregon Territory, the next ten days traveling 132 miles. On the second day Field reported having voted to follow Tetherow’s company ahead of them, over the Greenwood Cut-off to Ft. Hall. This cut-off saved the emigrants several days of travel time, but the price they paid was their having to travel a considerable distance between camping places without water and grass for the work oxen and loose cattle. On one of the days the Riggs’ company traveled a continuous twenty-four hours, not arriving back on the regular route until about 6:30 the next morning with their oxen quite jaded. There were also bluffs so steep that Field spoke of having to double their teams to get over them.

FIELD: Sat., July 19.- ... After spending all the forepart of the day in ascending it, a person at 2 o’clock could almost have thrown a stone to where we were at 10 o’clock. It reminded me of an old couplet that would fit: Capt.

Riggs with all his teams and men—“Marched up a hill and then marched down again.”

Wed., July 23.--Went about 10 miles today, over one more mountain, coming down upon Bear River and camping on it. This river is one of the streams which empty into the Great Salt Lake.

Having already passed successfully through Greenwood's Cut-off, from July 24 to 30 they spent seven days going 100 miles at a very respectable clip of fourteen miles per day. They then crossed the Wasatch Mountains that divided the Bear and Snake River drainage areas, and entered into what is today's state of Idaho. One more long day's journey and they were at Ft. Hall, arriving there on the last day of July.

FIELD: Thurs., July 31.--Eighteen miles today took us to Fort Hall, which stands upon the broad, level bottom of Snake River, with fine pasturage and some timber around it, and surrounded by a few wigwams of the Eutaw and other tribes of Indians. It is a good sized fort, built like Fort Larimie of unburnt bricks, and is one of the posts of the Hudson's Bay Co. The superintendent of the fort is a very gentlemanly man, a Scotchman, I believe, and showed a good deal of kindness to the immigrants, but like most others in the Indian country, well disposed to make a good bargain off them when it can be done. They told us the first companies who arrived a few days before took them by surprise, being a month earlier than companies had ever reached the fort before [in previous years migrations].

Fort Hall was located near where the Oregon Trail first met the Snake River, the primary tributary of the Columbia River and the most important western river on the Oregon Trail. The fort was run by Hudson's Bay Company chief factor Capt. Richard Grant, and was well stocked with supplies needed by the emigrants to complete their journey, which had been brought from Ft. Vancouver by packhorse. It was well known for charging what the travelers considered outrageous prices, but they commanded what the traffic would bear.

Emigrants started arriving on July 26, and by August 3 most all the St. Joseph companies had arrived and continued on. McNary arrived on July 26, and departed with a small party bound for California. Tetherow was led in by Caleb Greenwood on July 30, the same day as Parker. Riggs followed the next day on July 31.

McNary's company had passed over the divide July 5, and arrived at Ft. Hall on July 29, an elapsed time of 24 days overall. Capt. Riggs had crossed the divide on July 12, and arrived at Ft. Hall on Aug 1, for an elapsed time of 20 days. This was four days less travel time for Riggs using the Greenwood Cut-off, than McNary took on the longer "regular" route through Ft. Bridger.⁸

Although some of the travelers from Independence, Missouri, had mixed in with the forward companies from St. Joe, most of them arrived later between Aug 3 and Aug 10. Among these was their pilot Stephen Meek, who had been traveling with his new bride and Capt. Thomas Stephens, in advance of

the Independence group. They had traded its wagons for pack mules at Ft. Hall, upon Meek completing his piloting assignment at that point.⁹

At Ft. Hall there were those who attempted to turn emigrants onto the road to California. They told them how easy a journey it would be, compared to the difficulties they would encounter on the road to Oregon. Among them was Caleb Greenwood himself, who had successfully led many emigrants over the short-cut that now bore his name. Greenwood told the travelers that the Oregon road was nearly impassable with its thick brush and steep mountain grades, that it had little grass and water, and no wood for campfires, plus there were several savage native tribes which were determined to keep settlers from passing through their homeland. And of course there was the treacherous trip down the Columbia River at the end of the journey, in which each year emigrants were lost in those turbulent waters.

Capt. Sam Barlow's company was said to have stayed up nearly all night discussing whether to turn off to California. Barlow was dead set against Americans going to a country that was under another flag. He told his company "he was going to 'drive' his teams and wagons into the Willamette valley." Nevertheless, nearly half of Barlow's company ended up opting for the California turnoff, while Sam Barlow himself and some loyal stalwarts continued on to Oregon.¹⁰

From August 1 through 5, the Riggs Company made 52 miles in five days, averaging just 10 miles per day after getting a late start leaving Ft. Hall, as a result of doing some trading and laying by for some wagon repair. The companies came upon the Raft River turnoff onto the California Trail, leading to the Humboldt River and over the Sierra-Nevada mountains. California was Mexican Territory, and thus under the rule of a foreign government which had only just declared its own independence from Spain in 1823. Mainly for this reason, the number of 1845 wagons turning off was relatively small. Of the roughly 450 wagons that year, only 54 turned off onto the California Trail – just over ten percent of the entire migration.¹¹

The Riggs company traveled 138 miles down the Snake River, during the eleven days from August 6 through August 16, averaging 12.5 miles per day. They passed what are referred to as the Thousand Springs, "... a series of streams which gush from beneath the rimrock and cascade into the river."¹²

Here, the McNary, Parker and Riggs companies were traveling together, but Field said he didn't expect this arrangement to last for long. The reason the other companies had joined Riggs is that the "Walla Walla Indians are reported to have assembled some 75 or 100 miles below here for the purpose of stopping the emigrants passing through their territory and it is said they have killed two of the Frenchmen who were with us as pilots on Sweetwater." But apparently nothing ever came of it.¹³

FIELD: Sun., Aug. 17.--Went about eight miles, camping on Barrel creek. A small company of six or seven men and two women passed us to-day,

having left their wagons at Fort Hall and taken pack horses. The road this day was one of the most stony we have yet passed over, being the same iron-like stone spoken of before crossing Snake river.

This small company was apparently the pack party of Steven Meek. Having guided the division out of Independence traveling behind them, Meek was not recognized by Field, nor did Field mention Meek having spoken to anyone in the Riggs' company. From this August 17 passing, the Riggs company traveled another seventy-six miles, before crossing the Boise River for the last time four days later on August 22, averaging a good fifteen miles per day.

FIELD: Sat., August 23.--Went four miles this morning, which took us to Fort Boise, which stands on the eastern bank of Snake river near the mouth of the Boise. ... It was necessary to re-cross Snake river at this place, which is here fordable, and we all got safely over during the afternoon, camping on the western bank. The Indians assisted us in crossing, showing us the ford and helping us to drive the loose cattle, in return for which a few presents pleased them greatly. The river is near half a mile wide, and so deep as to run over the tops of the wagon sides in places, but as it was generally of uniform depth all the way across, the current was not so rapid as at the other crossings.

It was on August 23 that, finally after all these months, the Riggs company had arrived at Ft. Boise. They were now preparing to cross the Snake River and enter into the present-day *state* of Oregon for the first time -- the end of their long journey across half a continent now within reach. From there they would proceed on down the “regular” Oregon Trail, over the Blue Mountains and through the country of the Walla Walla Indians, and then across present-day Oregon to The Dalles of the Columbia River. Once there at The Dalles, these 1845 emigrants had only to navigate that treacherous river and they would arrive at their destination -- the promised land that laid just beyond.

At least that was the way it had been done before, in the two years of the first large migrations over the Oregon Trail, in both 1843 and 1844.