

## Chapter Five

# The Dalles

The brothers Albert & James Davidson were among the first 1845 emigrants to reach Ft. Vancouver, the main Hudson's Bay Company outpost on the north side of the Columbia River. These brothers had started out in T'Vault's division with the Riggs party, narrowly avoiding the disaster of the Meek Cut-off by choosing to stay on the "regular" Oregon Trail and follow it on into The Dalles. From there they traveled thirty-five miles down the Columbia River to the fort via HBC crafts, all in about a day's time.

It was on the same September 24th date on which James Field lost consciousness, that the Davidson brothers visited HBC chief factor Dr. John McLoughlin, to thank him for the use of company boats. The two brothers were the first to bring the startling news that this 1845 migration would be bringing so many people to the valley settlements that it would double the non-native population of the Oregon Territory! This large influx would also create a huge demand for boats to transport them down the treacherous Columbia River at the end of the Oregon Trail. Of course these two brothers, having followed the regular route to the river, had no way of knowing the appalling condition in which their brethren on the Meek Cut-off would be arriving.<sup>1</sup>

Diarist Samuel Parker had traveled very close to, or in company with the Riggs party throughout the journey over this new route, sometimes under the command of Capt. J. B. Riggs. Parker and Riggs apparently maintained this close traveling relationship during the remainder of the journey, at least into The Dalles, where it was everyone for one's self.

Their story takes up again as reported in Parker's typically terse but most revealing journal entry of September 23rd -- the day prior to Field losing consciousness from camp fever. It was on this opening day of autumn that Parker reported what had by then become the widespread manifestation of the deadly effects of this same mysterious disease that had first manifested itself as early as September 3, after only nine days on the Meek Cutoff.

In following Parker's daily journal over the next two weeks, there emerges within the main story of these Meek Cutoff travelers finally getting to The Dallas, what may have been perhaps the even more important underlying story: whether most of these struggling Meek Cutoff immigrants were going to get there at all! The dreaded "camp fever" was now starting to claim its victims wholesale -- extracting its toll of four burials in a single day -- and it would wholly incapacitate a day later the Riggs party's young and otherwise healthy strapping young teamster, chronicler James Field.

*PARKER: Tues, Sept 23 (Day 30) -- to a Spring 18 mi. Beried 4 persons heare.*

These four burials were at Rim Rock Springs, located just east of the present-day U.S. Highway 26 from Prineville to Madras, ten miles or so after the highway swings northwesterly heading toward present-day Madras and the Deschutes River beyond. The deaths may not all have occurred on the same day as the burials, but the emigrants' situation had become no less desperate.

*PARKER: Wed, Sept 24 (Day 31) -- traveled all day and that nite. Thurs, Sept 25 (Day 32) -- all that day and all nite and struck water about 10 [a.m.] the 26 day -- 65 mi. [for clarity "mi." has been added by the author where necessary, along with some punctuation].*

The sixty-five miles of travel reported by Parker involved some of his scouting for McNary and Riggs on Agency Plains northwest of Madras. They were all looking for a place to cross the raging Deschutes River, the northerly course of which they were following along its east bank.

*PARKER: Fri, Sept 26 (Day 33) -- many codent get to water and water was taken to them -- 32 in number -- heare we beried 6 persons.*

Sagebrush Springs is south of where the northeasterly-flowing Deschutes is joined by Trout Creek near the present-day Jefferson-Wasco County line. Here the main body met up with Meek and the Tetherow group from whom they had separated eleven days earlier on September 15, and who had arrived at the spring just before them. There was ample water here, but nearly three-dozen people were so sick that the spring water had to be carried to them. And now six more burials brought the total deaths from camp fever reported by Parker to ten persons in only four days.

*PARKER: Sat, Sept 27 (Day 34) -- laid by -- heare my wife tuck sick and child -- missis butts not expected to live.*

Camp fever had now reached into Parker's own family, striking both his pregnant wife-and-mother of their soon-to-be ninth child, in addition to their youngest child, one-year-old Virginia. John Butts' wife Catherine was a former Iowa neighbor of Parker's who had taken ill on the first day on the Meek Cutoff.

*PARKER: Sun, Sept 28 (Day 35) -- went 10 miles -- 10 mi.*

The main emigrant body camped on Trout Creek near present-day Willowdale, in preparation for tomorrow's steep doubled-teamed ascent up Bull Mountain ahead, which historians Clark & Tiller described as "horrendous ... unbelievable for wagons today."<sup>2</sup>

*PARKER: Mon, Sept 29 (Day 36) -- all day gitting up hill -- laid with out water -- beried 3 heare -- 3 mi.*

In the meantime, the Meeks riding ahead with Capt. Tetherow's advance party had arrived at Buck Hollow Creek, where they took a party down the canyon to determine if it would be possible to get the wagons across the Deschutes. At this point the Deschutes was a greater barrier than the Cascade Mountains -- too swift to be either forded or navigated. It would have been far easier crossing northward near where the Deschutes empties into the Columbia. But the condition of the emigrants was getting more critical every day, and the choice of the shorter route over the less difficult one was clearly indicated.

How to get wagons across the river presented a unique engineering challenge that the ingenious travelers decided they could best solve by caulking some of the tighter-built wagon beds with tar to make them watertight. Using ropes they would then pull these wagons back and forth across the river, ferrying all the emigrants and their belongings. While the others returned to inform the rest of the wagoners of this plan, the Meeks and Olney rode ahead thirty miles to purchase the necessary supplies, on horses borrowed from the local Indians.

Arriving at Wascopan Methodist Mission at The Dalles of the Columbia later that afternoon of September 29, Meek purchased out of his own pocket the ropes and pulleys needed for the crossing, and food for the starving emigrants. Fearing their animosity if he returned, Meek persuaded an old friend and fellow-trapper, Moses "Black" Harris, who was at the mission, to take the provisions back to those waiting at the Deschutes River crossing.

*PARKER: Tue, Sept 30 (Day 37) -- traveled all day and till in the night and came to water -- 35 mi. -- Coming in all nite -- 5 beried here.*

The death toll from camp fever reported by Parker had now risen to eighteen in only one week's time, but today there was also some good news for a change. Black Harris's relief party arrived at the Deschutes crossing point with the supplies Meek had bought at the mission. There was much exuberance over the emigrants now realizing they were once again in touch with civilization. They sent some of the supplies up the canyon, together with the news that they now had the ropes and pulleys needed to conquer this one final obstacle. They then started across the Deschutes gorge at a place now known as "Sherar's Bridge" (on today's Highway 216), on a crossing which would later be referred to as "the most amazing feat of all," especially given how sick and thoroughly worn out these stricken emigrant's were.<sup>3</sup>

*PARKER: Wed, Oct 1 (Day 38) -- went 9 mi.*

The main emigrant body had now started to wind their way down Buck Hollow canyon in a steep descent into the Deschutes gorge. Because of the terrain, they were forced to take the wagons single-file down the creek bed.

*PARKER: Thurs, Oct 2 (Day 39) -- got to the deshutes river -- Missis Butts dyed this day -- my wife and child and second daughter all sick -- 9 mi.*

*Fri, Oct 3 (Day 40) -- Crossed the deshutes river in a wagon body and tuck the wagons apart and tuck a wheale at a time by ropes -- this day my two small boys tuck sick -- Gideon and George and Susan my forth girl -- 6 of my family sick at one time.*

Having disassembled his wagon to bring it over the torrid river, the members of Parker's family had made it across the Deschutes. However, two-thirds of them were now suffering with camp fever -- his pregnant wife Elizabeth and five of their eight children: Pricilla 13, Susan 7, Gideon 6, George 3, and Virginia 1. So far only Sarah 16, Newton 11, and Armanda 9 had been spared.

*PARKER: Sun, Oct 5 (Day 42) -- day I got all over and went 3 miles to a small Creek -- heare we beried missis Butts and 3 more.*

The camp fever death toll reported by Parker had risen to twenty-one -- and six were ill in Parker's own family. Mrs Butts was finally put to final rest, on The Dalles' side of the Deschutes.

*PARKER: Mon, Oct 6 (Day 43) -- the wagons started on and I went Back for a horse and ox and cow. got the horse but never got the ox nor cow -- my family sow I codent Stay -- overtuck the wagons about midnight -- all my family verry bad -- 27 mi.*

*Tues, Oct 7 (Day 44) -- this morning nothing to eat -- got to the mishion at dark -- 17 mi -- got in a house with my family -- got something to eat -- this was the first day we had done without something to eat but some in the company had been with out bread fore 15 days and had to live on pore beef with out any thing else.*

The term "poor beef" was used in those days specifically to describe what the wagoners sometimes referred to as "blue and glue." It was beef usually from oxen so thin and emaciated from pulling the wagons across the country, that it was so tough and tasteless as to be near worthless for eating, and therefore used reluctantly only as a very last resort.

*PARKER: I will just say pen and tong will both fall short when they gow to tell the suffering the company went through.*

Neither "pen nor tongue" could describe the suffering these wagoners had endured -- it was indescribable! By mid-October, there had been so many sufferers arriving at the Wascopan mission at The Dalles that its head man wrote his superior Rev. George Gary in Oregon City saying "he was about worn out waiting on the sick of the Meek party, and asking what to do."<sup>4</sup>

*PARKER: Thare my wife and Child died and I staid till the 3rd of November when I left fore Oregon City in a large Canoe with four indiens for which I gave sixty dollars. when I started the wet wether had set in. I did not*

*expect to get to the city with my fore sick children and my oldest girl that was sick. I was looking all the time for hir to die. I tuck my seete in the Canoe by hir and held hir up and the same at nite.*

Parker had arrived at Wascopan Mission on Tuesday, October 7, and didn't get under way again to Oregon City until Monday, Nov 3. What remained of his family had spent four full weeks there recuperating from the Meek Cut-off fever, before they were ready to get underway again. Oregon City was generally considered the "valley" terminus of the trail journey, situated on the east side of the Willamette River near the river's thirty-five foot waterfall before it reached the Columbia. From there, territory on the east side of the river could be accessed directly, but more emigrants crossed to the west side, bound for Yamhill and what would shortly become Polk County, comprising all of Oregon to the south. Oregon City's population of 300 would be doubled by the influx of 1845 travelers.

Camp fever had now claimed Parker's wife Elizabeth and youngest two children: Pricilla, age one, and newborn James Luther, who had spent almost the entire journey traveling inside his now deceased mother's womb. Tragically, he had lived only long enough to "see" the Columbia River. All three were buried at the mission.

This brought the known deaths probably attributable directly to camp fever to two dozen at a minimum – at least that was the number of deaths reported only by Parker during the final leg of the Meek Cutoff between Rim Rock Springs and The Dalles. There were known to have been more deaths from camp fever, in addition to the many deaths from drowning and other causes. Meek's new route had been a tragic mistake of the first order, by far the worst disaster in the annals of the Oregon Trail, and perhaps even the entire western migration. Here is what happened to one unfortunate party:

Maria Allen King wrote the following letter home, telling what occurred on the final phase of the 1845 journey. This party experienced deaths from virtually every imaginable cause traveling the Meek Cut-off, and then on the treacherous Columbia River route. Twenty-three-year-old Maria had traveled west with her now deceased husband, in the much larger party of her father-in-law, patriarch Nahum King, along with the Fuller family, probably traveling just behind Capt. J. B. Riggs' company for most of the journey:

*MARIAH KING: Dear Mother, brothers, and sisters,*

*After travelling six months we arrived at Lynnton on the Willamette November the 1st. We had beautiful weather all the way, no rain of any account. We got along finely until we came to Fort Boisen [Boise], within 3 or 4 [hundred] miles of Lynnton, when along came a man by the name of Meiks, who said he could take us on a new route across the Cascade Mountains to the Willamette river in 20 days, so a large company of a hundred and fifty or two hundred wagons left the old road to follow the new road and traveled for two*

*months over sand, rocks, hills and anything else but good roads.*

*Two thirds of the immigrants ran out of provisions and had to live on poor beef ... But worse than all this, sickness and death attended us the rest of the way ... after we took the new route a slow lingering fever prevailed. Out of Chambers, L. Norton's, John [King]'s and our family, none escaped [the fever] except Solomon and myself. But listen to the deaths. Sally Chambers, John King and his wife, their little daughter Electra and their babe, a son 9 months old, and Dulaney C. Norton's sister are gone. Mr. A[rnold] Fuller lost his wife and daughter Tabitha. Eight of our two families have gone to their long homes ....*

*Those that went the old road got through six weeks before us, with no sickness at all. Upwards of fifty died on the new route. ...<sup>5</sup>*