

Chapter Eight

Southern Route

Capt. Levi Scott was the epitome of a self-made man of the American frontier – a bona fide “frontiersman.” Born February 8, 1797, and raised without benefit of loving parents on the edge of the frontier, the fiercely independent Scott had migrated west over the Oregon Trail in 1844, upon the untimely loss of his wife of twenty-five years. Scott was seizing what was to be his last chance to start life anew, on the new American frontier which was moving to distant Oregon.

Owing to the excessive rains in 1844, the entire migration got underway late on the Oregon Trail. But halfway through the journey Capt. Scott demonstrated the leadership qualities he had developed while commanding a company in the Black Hawk Wars in Illinois against the Sac Indians from 1831 to 1833. According to his account, Scott was elected to assume the leadership of half of Nathaniel Ford’s trail followers, when they grew dissatisfied with their former leader. By the time Scott’s party reached Ft. Hall in early September, they traded their team and wagon with the proprietor of the fort for horses and pack-rigging, and proceeded on horseback for the remainder of the journey. Scott explained that their work oxen had become exhausted, and it was getting so late in the season that his party feared they might be caught by the winter snows in the mountains.

Upon reaching the Dalles of the Columbia River late in October, the travelers had arrived at the point where most all emigrants sought out means to transport their families and equipment down this treacherous stretch in the journey. Scott’s small party was still traveling on horseback and was therefore unencumbered with excessive equipment, belongings, or large families to look after. So they decided instead to follow another party who were for the first time taking an Indian trail that led over the north face of majestic Mt. Hood, Oregon’s tallest Cascade mountain. On November 2 they started over this little-used pathway, following the small group of emigrants who tried unsuccessfully to drive cattle over the narrow overland route, and eventually lost the entire herd.

The narrowness of what Scott later referred to as the “wretched trail,” his small party had taken, made it entirely unsuitable for wagons, or even for driving cattle and horses into the valley. This footpath was only three feet wide in places, and required swimming across Hood River. Scott commented on the general opinion that there was a decided need for a suitable road for bringing wagons and equipment into the valley, to satisfy the large influx of new settlers who were expected in the years ahead.¹ Scott apparently did not

fully realize at the time that in following this route, he had participated in what was the first small attempt at finding this suitable route for bringing emigrant wagons over the Cascade Mountain barrier.

Scott did, however, accurately foresee the great wave of future emigrants who in years to come would surely be arriving at this great river in need of a practical wagon route past the formidable barrier it presented. Perhaps he was even anticipating that one day he would play a major role in the discovery of one of these new routes over the Cascade Mountains, which would attempt to satisfy this anticipated large future need. Yet at the time Capt. Levi Scott could not possibly have known that he himself would be the one man to lead what proved to be the longest and most ambitious of those undertakings, and heroically guide a company of struggling, half-starved and half-frozen emigrants and their wagons over the Cascade Mountains and into the Willamette Valley beyond.

Now less than one year short of having lived for half a century, the ever-restless Scott was ready to take on the next challenge.

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1846

Fast-forward to the year 1846, a year which, with respect to the Oregon Trail and the Oregon Territory, turned out to be a most eventful year. Historian Bernard DeVoto in looking back a century later referred to it as “The Year of Decision,” in his classic book by that same name. Historian Dale Morgan referred to 1846 as “one of the most remarkable in the varied annals of overland emigration across the American West...”²

Starting on April 2, 1846, the following advertisement was run in three bi-weekly editions of the *Oregon Spectator* newspaper over the name of settler Nathaniel Ford, age 51, who had captained one of the 1844 wagon trains, to assemble a company of volunteers for the following purpose:

OVER THE MOUNTAINS

*The company to examine for a practicable wagon route from the Willamette valley to Snake river, will rendezvous at the residence of Nat. Ford on the Rickreal, so as to be ready to start on the trip on the first day on next May. The contemplated route will be up the Willamette valley, crossing the Cascade mountains south of the three snowy buttes [the Three Sisters Mountains]. A portion of the company will return after crossing the Cascade mountains. It is hoped that several young men will be prepared to go on to meet the emigration. Those agreed to start at the time above mentioned, are Solomon Tetherow, Nathaniel Ford, Gen. C[ornelius] Gilliam, Stephen H. L. Meek, and Moses Harris, and many others, it is expected, will be ready by the time above specified.*³

During the same week that our James Smith ancestors departed over the Oregon Trail from Independence, Missouri – and nearly a month after Lansford W. Hastings’ company of nineteen had set out from Mexican Territory in search of a new wagon route to California – a party of explorers likewise started out on May 15, 1846, again traveling eastward, but this time in search of the new route to Oregon mentioned in the Nathaniel Ford ad. This party of fifteen recent Willamette Valley settlers – encouraged in part by the two failed attempts the year before -- in response to a popular call for finding a new wagon route into the valley settlements -- left from Polk County in the Oregon Territory, where these “exploring party” members had settled during the past few years.

This exploring party proceeded on horseback southward from Rickreal Creek in Polk County, following the existing Hudson Bay Company’s Old Trappers’ Pack Trail to California. Their object was to locate a possible new “southern route” that would admit Oregon emigrants with their wagons into their eventual Willamette Valley destination from its southern end (see map).

According to Scott the exploring party consisted of himself and his son, John, David Goff (Nathaniel Ford’s son-in-law), Moses “Black” Harris, Cornelius “Neal” Gilliam, Benjamin F. Burch, Bennett Osborn, Jack Jones, William Sportsman, S. H. Goodhue, William G. Parker, Robert Smith, Solomon Tetherow, William H. Wilson, and John Owens.⁴

There were thought to be two key advantages of a "southern route" over the Cascades. First of all, it could prove to be a shorter and more direct route into the Willamette Valley, especially for those emigrants settling more toward its southern end. Secondly, and more importantly, unlike the existing northern route, it would not lie dangerously close to "enemy" territory -- the north side of the Columbia River. Most settlers expected that the Columbia River would eventually define the U.S. border with British "Columbia," when the jointly-owned Oregon Territory would one day be divided between the two contesting countries.

The explorers "picked up" the Old Trappers' Trail as it passed from Ft. Vancouver south through central Polk County, and traveled southward through modern-day Corvallis. They continued up the Long Tom River (from its Callipoya Indian name, phonetically "La Ma Tam Buff"), to what is today's Eugene/Springfield area. From there they proceeded on to a promontory they named "Spencer's Butte" (in today's south Eugene), where they could see eastward up the reaches of the three origins of the Willamette River: the Coast Fork flowing from the south, the Middle Fork from the southeast, and the McKenzie from the northeast. The explorers then traveled eastward up the Middle Fork about twenty miles to Butte Disappointment "supposing we would be likely to find a pass across the mountains near the head of the river,"⁵ as Scott told it. Seeing no satisfactory route across the Cascades south of the Three Sisters Mountain peaks, they retreated back to the confluence of the Middle Fork and the Coast Fork.

(In going southeasterly up the Middle Fork of the Willamette the exploring party had been on the right track, but did not proceed quite far enough. To reach the pass over the Cascade Mountains they would have had to have gone roughly forty more miles further up the Middle Fork to near today's town of Lowell on Highway 58, crossed just south of lofty Diamond Peak, one of the Central Oregon High Cascades, and then passed between Summit and Crescent Lakes. From there the descent was less than twenty miles further to the Little Deschutes River in central Oregon. Ironically, this was not too far from where Stephen Meek supposedly had been searching for a route into the valley from the east side of the mountains the year before, on the 1845 Meek Cut-off.)

Disappointed, the exploring party then returned to their previous southerly direction, following again the general course of the Old Trappers' Trail down the Coast Fork of the Willamette into its source in the Calipooya Mountains. It was at this point that explorer Colonel Cornelius "Neal" Gilliam, a leader of the 1844 wagon train, grew dissatisfied and left for home, while the remaining party crossed the Calipooya Mountains, and pushed southward into the Umpqua Valley.

Here the exploring party started to disband in earnest. Sol Tetherow, a leader of the 1845 train (who had led one of the companies traveling over the Meek Cutoff), left the party, along with William Wilson and Robert Smith. Finally, after having gone almost 150 miles from the settlements and into the

Umpqua Valley as far as Calipooya Creek, what was left of the party gave up the search and returned home. On the way back to the settlements, Scott discussed with the remaining explorers the possibility of raising a new company and pushing the exploration further.

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Lindsay Applegate began his classic account of the actual discovery of the 'Southern Route' with his description of a second exploring party departing again from Rickreal Creek in central Polk County, on either June 20 or 22, 1846. Lindsay's brother, acting **Capt. Jesse Applegate**, led this new party. In the first large Oregon Trail migration of 1843, the Applegate families had the misfortune of losing two young sons who had drowned coming down the treacherous Columbia River, so these brothers had an added motivation for finding a new route that would avoid that hazardous obstacle.

According to Lindsay Applegate's account, his brother Jesse had obtained a map made by Peter Ogden, chief explorer for the Hudsons Bay Company. During 1824 through 1829, Ogden had explored and mapped the Oregon Territory and beyond, extending on into Utah and California. Using Ogden's map to guide them, the new exploring party hoped to locate a route over the Cascade Mountains that would tie the Old Trappers' Trail to "Ogden's" River -- the Humboldt (see map). This was the river that the existing California Trail followed through most of present-day Nevada after leaving Ft. Hall, bringing emigrants over the Sierra-Nevada Mountains and into the future "golden state."⁶

The new "southern route" these explorers were seeking would thus bring Oregon-bound travelers from Ft. Hall southwesterly down the existing California Trail, and then divert them northwesterly toward Oregon, where they would eventually "link up" with the Old Trappers' Trail between Oregon and California, and then proceed northerly over it on into the Willamette Valley settlements. In theory it was perhaps the simplest of possible new routes -- yet perhaps not so easy to locate on the ground.

This new exploring party again proceeded southward down the Old Trappers' Trail as had the first exploring party before them. On passing through Levi Scott's claim located south of the Polk County settlements, the exploring party asked him to join them, and Scott quickly dropped his work and with his son John fell in with them immediately, bringing their number to fifteen.

According to both Scott and Lindsay Applegate the second exploring party was again comprised of fifteen men, consisting of the brothers Jesse and Lindsay Applegate, William G. Parker, Benjamin F. Burch, David Goff, John Owens, Robert Smith, Bennett Osborn, S. H. Goodhue, Jack Jones, Henry Boygus, William Sportsman, Moses "Black" Harris, Levi Scott and his son John; twelve of whom had been on the earlier expedition according to Scott's account.

This new “South Road” exploring party again followed the Old Trappers' Trail through today's Eugene and on into the Umpqua valley, until they came near the foot of the Umpqua mountains. Here they met a small party driving cattle and horses northward from California for the purpose of settling in Oregon. Scott identified them as “a Mr. Hess and his family, including Hess's new son-in-law, John Chamberlin, age thirty-one, who Hess' fourteen-year-old daughter, Nancy, had met at Sutter's Fort in January, 1846.”⁷

Forty-four-year-old John Hess and his family were among the fifty or so wagons which had turned off onto the California Trail down the Humboldt River, on the 1845 wagon train. The Hess family's departure from California in 1846 may have been due in part to the Mexican government's recent inhospitality toward the “number of American emigrants to enter California in 1845, and the probable number to follow.”⁸

SCOTT: They informed us it was about ten miles across the mountain, and that the trail was very rough and difficult. They said that while they were crossing the mountain, the Indians had wounded one of them with an arrow, and had run off one of their pack-horses down the steep mountain side into a wooded thicket where they dared not follow them. ... a wagon road never could be made across the mountain; that it could scarcely be crossed with pack-horses, and that any party, in crossing, would be constantly in danger from the Indians.

Both Scott and Lindsay Applegate told the story of how upon hearing this report, on June 26 they formed a smaller group to see if a wagon road could be made through the canyon itself. Scott said he accompanied Jesse Applegate, Parker and Burch going up the creek that flowed through the canyon finding “the grade for a road much better than we had expected, but with some very steep places.” The canyon was full of dense brush that was difficult to crawl through, along with “great quantities of logs and boulders choking up the pass, which would have to be removed in opening a road.”⁹

SCOTT: That evening we returned to camp on the south side of the mountain, by the trail on which we had crossed the day before. We made our report to the rest of the company, and all of us together gravely and carefully discussed the feasibility of making a wagon road through the canyon, with its probable cost, and the time it would take to accomplish it. We had no difficulty in arriving at the conclusion that it could be done, and was a better place for a road than we had hoped to find, but the other questions were not so easily, nor satisfactorily settled.

Despite these unanswered questions regarding the suitability of a route through the Umpqua Canyon, the explorers continued on. They next crossed over the Umpqua Mountains, reached the Rogue River, and persuaded some local Indians to ferry them with their packs across in the Indians' rude canoe. They then drove their more than thirty head of horses across the river, and camped on the other side. Continuing up the river eastward, they struck Bear

Creek (south of present-day Medford), then went up Emigrant Creek until they struck a spur of the Siskiyou Mountains.

On June 29, 1846, the South Road Exploring Party turned off the existing Trappers' Trail and was then pioneering their own route, heading "eastward through an unexplored region several hundred miles in extent."¹⁰ They were hoping to discover a vital connecting link between the Old Trappers' Trail leading into California from the north, and the California Trail leading from the Oregon Trail on into California from the east.

According to Lindsay Applegate, on June 30 they began ascending the first ridge of the Cascade Mountains to the east, "which we found to be gradual." They spent the day examining the hills around Keene creek, and on July 1 they ran into a rocky ridge that they didn't find a practicable pass through for two days. On July 4, "after crossing the summit of the Cascade ridge [following generally the course of today's Green Springs Highway 66], the descent was, in places, very rapid -- suggesting that the climb for wagons coming from the east might be very steep."¹¹

Once over the Cascades they followed the Klamath River nearly to where it runs out of the Lower or Little Klamath Lake, crossed it, and camped for the night. "We were now on the east side of the Cascades Mountains but there was not one of us who had the slightest suspicion that we had accomplished so much."¹² Although the exploring party had achieved their initial objective of finding a way over the Cascades, Scott was suggesting here that the feat was meaningless if they were unable to find a way to connect up with the California Trail that brought emigrants from the east.

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The exploring party continued on traveling northeasterly until they struck Tule Lake, then proceeded into an area that they described as being well populated with Indians. Continuing easterly through northeastern California, they proceeded on into the arid Nevada desert, where they sometimes went long stretches before reaching grass and water. Many of the explorers had grown disappointed with having to toil in the afternoons over the dry, hot sand, and began grumbling against Captain Applegate's leadership. The matter was resolved by the captain appointing Scott and David Goff to share with Applegate the leadership responsibilities.

On July 9, they ascended the Warner Mountains, which they supposed to be a spur of the Sierra Nevadas, and went through a gap in the mountain wall at Fandango Pass. Scott recalled, "[a]s we stood on the Sierra ridge, we surveyed the vast desert plains eastward of Surprise Valley, apparently without grass or trees, and marked by numerous high rocky ridges" and soon began "our long and weary march on the desert."

They did find water that night at an unexpected spring in this arid country, but there was so little water "by digging some we were able to get quite

enough for ourselves and our horses, though it kept us busy until about midnight to get the horses watered. Although we had met with singularly good fortune in thus finding water at the close of the first day's march on the desert, we could not always expect such good luck in the future; and as we lay down in our blankets among the sagebrush that night, we could not help having some gloomy forebodings in regard to the future of our expedition." On July 12, they finally arrived at Black Rock.

SCOTT: [We had been] for two weeks expecting every day to find a stream laid down on Ogden's map as Mary's [the Humboldt] river, but still we did not reach it. I am satisfied, from later explorations made by me, that Ogden passed much further north, around the north end of the Big Klamath lake, and struck Sprague river, since which, he laid down correctly on his map, but called it 'Mary's river.' This stream, Sprague river, empties into the Big Klamath Lake. It runs in the same general course as the stream laid down on Ogden's map, and is the only stream in all this region of country which answers to his description. We mistook the Humboldt for this river when we afterwards struck it.¹³

Scott believed they were lost, and some others thought they should be going eastward. Most felt it was best to first locate the Humboldt River to the south, and then follow it north-eastwardly toward Ft. Hall, having the benefit of plenty of water and grass along its banks. This was resolved by their deciding to split up, with Scott and eight explorers going south, and five other explorers following Capt. Jesse Applegate in a more easterly direction. Scott named Goff, Burch, Parker, Owens, Osborn, Goodhue, Jones, and his son as those who accompanied him, while Lindsay Applegate remembers on July 14 their having divided a more evenly unnamed seven and eight, rather than Scott's six and nine.

The next several days were spent traveling through the arid desert during mid-July – the so-called “dog days” of summer, when the sun is in Sirius the Dog Star, and the hot dry weather is at its peak:

SCOTT: ... the sand was so hot that it would almost blister a man's feet through his shoes. Both men and horses were suffering intensely. We had neither eaten nor drunk anything since early in the morning, but we did not suffer so much for want of food; it was water! water! water! But after we had lain still for a while in the shadows of the night, our blood cooled a little, and its hot, rushing current quieted down, till we began to feel more comfortable, and finally fell asleep, to dream of floating and bathing in a broad, clear river of pure, cool water from which we could not drink, although we plunged deep into its waves and struggled to take in the water that would never quite rise to our lips, and a draught of empty air was all we could get. Whoever has marched all day and slept all night without water, in a hot sandy desert, during the dog-days will understand our situation, and our dreams, better than we can describe them with a pen.

Upon awakening early the next morning, Jack Jones discovered that one of his loose horses had wandered off, and left to find him. The remaining party

took up the march, and at seven o'clock in the morning Scott's party finally had reached its hoped for destination, the Humboldt River.

"The Humboldt was a "deep, sluggish stream where we struck it, with perpendicular banks, and so full we could lie down and drink of it."¹⁴

After refreshing themselves, Scott's party proceeded immediately up the river northeasterly, in search of Jack Jones and the rest of the exploring party. They found them scattered and having fared no better than Scott's party, Bob Smith having come close to lying down to die in the desert heat. According to Lindsay Applegate's account, by six p.m. that same day – July 17 -- the explorers were all united once again. Believing correctly that they had struck the river on Ogden's map, they then proceeded up the Humboldt sixty miles over the next several days, to view out the California Trail toward Ft. Hall, and find the best place to turn off onto their newly discovered all-important connecting route – referred to here as the "Scott-Applegate Cut-off."

On July 21, the party reached what is now known as Lassen's Meadow, near today's Imlay, Nevada. From this point, Lindsay Applegate recalled "we could see what appeared to be a low pass through the ridge on the west." According to Scott, "we thought we had reached a good point [for the incoming emigrants] to leave it [the California Trail], and go west towards Black Rock."¹⁵

Almost exactly one month after they had left Polk County the South Road exploring party had accomplished their objective of discovering the "vital connecting link" they had sought between the two routes: the Old Trappers' Trail and the California Trail. As Lindsay Applegate later remarked: "[t]he line of our road was now complete. We had succeeded in finding a route across the desert and on to the Oregon settlements, with camping places at suitable distances, and, since we knew the source of the Humboldt river was near Ft. Hall, we felt that our enterprise was already a success."

But as events unfolded, there would come to be an entire company of emigrants who would rely on these explorers' assurances, and later vigorously challenge the eventual "successfulness" of their South Road enterprise.