

Closing Remarks

These Final Thoughts are in Memory of My Late Cousin, Robert Wesley Long, whom I Met Along the Trail

“Young Hickory” – President Andrew Jackson’s youthful protégé, James Knox Polk – after leaving office in 1849 would be remembered more for his campaign slogan -- “54-40 or Fight!” -- than for his substantial accomplishments as our eleventh president. In 1844 the forty-eight-year-old Polk had campaigned on setting the northern U.S. border as far north as 54 degrees, 40 minutes north latitude – at the present-day southern tip of Alaska. Yet in 1846, the two South Road Exploring Parties had expected that the Columbia River would eventually define the border between the American-owned Oregon Territory and “British” Columbia. The route they were seeking would avoid the danger of traveling down an Oregon Trail that would be directly across the river from “enemy” territory.

Unknown to the second exploring party, the very same week they set out from the Oregon country recently named for President Polk, in search of their new route, America and Britain settled the new U. S.-Canadian boundary at its present 49 degrees north latitude location. This new treaty removed the main reason for a “southern” entry route into the Willamette Valley, which these South Road explorers were pursuing.

Then in early 1848 at the end of the Mexican War (ostensibly initiated by Mexico in 1846 over the ownership of Texas), Polk obtained from Mexico their cession to the United States of California and the entire Southwest. When the previous week’s California gold discovery became widely known, this suddenly diminished Oregon and the Pacific Northwest’s importance as a commercial “gateway” to the Pacific Ocean and trade with China and the orient. In the next year alone, thousands of “forty-niners” flocked to California seeking instant riches -- the “Golden State” having overnight virtually supplanted Oregon as the new “promised land.”

It was a time of expansion, and the last half of the 1840s decade had been the most expansive in the history of the young country. Beginning with the annexation of the Texas Republic in 1845, President Polk during his single term in office had added more land to the United States than would be acquired at any time in its entire history -- more land than contained in either the original thirteen colonies and their western territories, or in the subsequent huge Louisiana Purchase made by President Thomas Jefferson in 1803.

President Polk’s three large land additions had nearly doubled the size of the country. These additions, together with the dual phenomena of the early wagon train migrations combined with the 1849 gold rush, brought tens of

thousands of new settlers to the Pacific Coast. In 1850 distant California was quickly admitted to the union as the first non-contiguous new state (Oregon would follow later in 1859).

In less than one decade the face of America had been transformed forever, by then spanning across an entire continent. During his brief four years in office, President Polk had added more land to the United States than any other president before or after. The youthful Polk passed away only one month after leaving office, having fulfilled not only his own manifest destiny, but that of the nation.

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Three Routes -- Afterwards:

The 1847 Barlow Road. Absalom Smith's older brother, Doctor Smith, age forty-four, led 100 wagons of Smith and Kimsey relatives west in the large 1847 migration. Named for the doctor who delivered him, Capt. "Doc" Smith's company included the parents of Hiley Kimsey Smith, my 63-year-old thrice-great grandparents, Hannah Jane McCracken & James Kimsey, Jr., who had both been born in 1784 and counted in the first U. S. census of 1790, and who settled on Polk County DLC (Donation Land Claim) Number 2137, across from today's Polk County Museum. It was said that along the way Doctor Smith declined an invitation to join his Missouri acquaintance Brigham Young and his large Mormon migration that same year, because Doc was leading emigrants who were coming to meet relatives who had already settled in Oregon. However, Doc himself never reached his destination, as he died en route from the mountain fever contracted coming over the Rockies, where he was buried. The story by his 17-year-old son Moses Ira Smith, who took over for him, appears in a piece provided by Doc Smith's granddaughter – our cousin Sarah Hunt Steeves (see Bibliography and Appendix II for 1846 & 1847 Barlow Road Rosters).

The 1847 Southern Route. The Southern Route was traveled in 1847 by a small party of emigrants again guided by Levi Scott. This longer route never gained the prominence of the Barlow Road, which became the preferred emigrant route into Oregon until the founding of the railroads a quarter century later. But in the ensuing years the development of the Hudson's Bay Company Old Trappers' Trail became a valuable link between California & Oregon, especially after the discovery of gold in California in early 1848, and the vast influx of settlers known as the "forty-niners" in the gold rush of 1849.

The 1853 Elliot Cut-off. To this day we do not know if Stephen Meek was searching for a direct route over the Cascades through central Oregon. But had he been, the idea of the Meek Cut-off was finally realized in 1853 with

the completion of the “Elliott Cut-off,” a route which never gained prominence as an established emigrant route into Oregon. In 1853 a party of emigrants led by Elijah Elliott, crossed the central Oregon desert generally following the course taken by Stephen Meek in the 1845 migration (see Chapter 4), and then up the Deschutes River and across the Cascades on their way to Eugene. This may have been the direct route over the Cascades and into the Willamette Valley for which Meek was said to have been searching. Coincidentally, Sol Tetherow, whose twenty-one wagons followed Meek in 1845 looking for the Deschutes River, was a member of the first 1846 South Road exploring party which was searching for just such a route, from the western side of the Cascades (see Chapter 8). Elliott’s party had barely survived their 1853 accomplishment, “with a great deal of labor, suffering and near starvation,” according to Leah Collins Menefee & Lowell Tiller, “Cutoff Fever” parts I through VI, *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 6 vols. December, 1976, to Spring, 1978, part I, page 311).

Of all the new routes which were attempted in the two-year period beginning mid-1845, it can be safely concluded that the more well defined and developed the route was, the better were its chances for success. Clearly, the 1845 Meek Cut-off was the most imperfectly defined new route, and therefore the least successful. There were periods when the route’s founder and guide Steven Meek did not seem to know where he was, or even where he was eventually leading his emigrant followers – directly over the Cascades, or down the John Day or Deschutes Rivers to The Dalles. That they were lost in an arid desert without fresh water for the oxen and themselves for a very long period of time, added to the suffering and death which inevitably followed. To his credit, Meek did take responsibility for seeing to it that those who did survive his new route eventually reached The Dalles.

In contrast, the 1846 Barlow Road was the most developed of the new routes – owing primarily to the fact that its founders, Barlow and Palmer, chose not to attempt bringing their wagons over it during the year of its initial discovery in 1845, which could have led to disaster. Instead, they waited until Barlow and a company of forty road builders had time to develop the route while the 1846 emigrants were en route, to make his new toll road sufficiently passable by the time they arrived. Although the route was barely passable, and was a “terror” in some of the very steep places, virtually all of the wagons did get through safely and in a timely manner that first year of its operation.

Between those two outcomes of failure and success, there was the Southern Route, which included some elements of each. The first section of the route – the well-established California Trail -- needed virtually no improvement, and therefore presented few problems. The middle section – the new Scott-Applegate Cut-off – contributed to the overall disaster that would follow, owing to the overly-long arid desert crossing at its beginning, and then crossing the Cascade Mountains at its other end. These two obstacles resulted in work oxen

becoming so badly jaded that many dropped along the route, unable to continue bearing their heavy burdens.

Finally, there was the third and final section of the Southern Route -- the Old Trappers' Trail -- which was essentially a narrow "trail" for trappers' horses, not intended for, or well-suited to, wagon travel. Plus, it included the dreaded Umpqua Canyon -- horrible at best and impassable for wagons at its worst. And the worst did arrive just when the emigrants were passing through it, owing mainly to the advance road building party having abandoned the emigrants, causing them to have to take valuable time to clear the road through the forests themselves, as they trudged slowly along. Their late arrival at this terrible canyon proved to be the eventual undoing of the entire South Road venture.

What is striking were the many similarities between Jesse Applegate's new Southern Route to Oregon, and Lansford W. Hastings' new "short-cut" to California, south of the Great Salt Lake. Both of these "enticers" had only recently discovered their new routes, coming east in that same year. They similarly promoted their "superior" 1846 routes enthusiastically to emigrants, as being shorter, and in all respects better than the established routes, with grass and water abundant, and only one short arid desert to cross. Unfortunately, both routes proved to be high-risk ventures, which were substantially longer than the established routes, mostly unimproved, and with dangerous desert crossing which were twice as long as promised. In addition there were difficult mountains to cross, and each had an almost impassable canyon to clear and negotiate. Both enticers deserted emigrants to fend for themselves, and in the end, the same early October 28 storm caught large numbers of unfortunate emigrants at the worst possible time, bringing dire results in each instance.

Most emigrants did make it through safely traveling over these two new 1846 "southern" routes to Oregon and California, but many did not arrive until 1847, and far too many did not arrive at all. And there was also great suffering and starvation owing to undertaking routes that were really not ready for wagon travel -- with the great loss of life caused primarily by the two routes' numerous and glaring deficiencies.

All in all, the period was the best of times and the worst of times for new extensions of the Oregon Trail. There was however, some measure of success in each of these undertakings, and a suitable wagon route over the Cascade Mountains did eventually result. What's more, out of over seventy-five of our own families' close relatives who traveled these three new routes to Oregon during this brief period of 1845 to 1847, not one single person is known to have lost his or her life due to any deficiency of the new routes themselves. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for far too many other emigrant families who traveled with them.

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Brief Smith Family Biographical Sketches:

RIGGS, James Berry & Nancy C. Anderson (both 45 Train)

James B. (1802) & Nancy C. (1803) and their eight children settled on DLC 2301 on Enterprise Road in the Salt Creek area of northwestern Polk County, located off of present-day Highway 22 – the Salem-Willamina highway -- from which they operated the Salt Creek Store and other enterprises. Both rest in Salt Creek Cemetery with most of their family.

SMITH, Absalom & Hilah “Hiley” Kimsey (both 46B Train)

Absalom (1805) & Hiley (1810) settled on DLC 4910 on Smithfield Road in north-central Polk County, a family farm served by a railroad which went through the property from the north and on into Dallas. “Smithfield” with its large Morgan Lake is now part of the 2500 acre Baskett Slough National Wildlife Refuge. The Smiths are buried alongside their many Smith & Kimsey relatives in the unmarked Smith-Brown Cemetery, hard to find halfway between Highway 22 and Dallas off of Highway 223 in the middle of a large Kimsey/Smith DLC enclave, in which Hiley’s Kimsey parents from the 1847 emigration are also buried.

SMITH, James Washington & Silbey Ann “Annie” Riggs (46B & 45 Trains)

James (1838) and “Annie” (1842) married in late 1860 in Polk County and had two children, Nancy (c1862) and Armand (1865). Annie died one year afterwards at age twenty-four, and James Washington, who had served a term as Polk County Sheriff, died in 1874, at age thirty-six. They rest together in the Riggs’ plot in Salt Creek Cemetery, and their two orphaned children were sent to live with their uncle Thomas Jefferson Smith in Colfax, Washington.

SMITH, James & Elizabeth M. Wright (both 46S Train)

James (1802) & Elizabeth (1812) settled on DLC 4250 at the end of today’s Smith Road near Lewisville in southern Polk County, between the Big & Little Luckiamute Rivers. They farmed there the rest of their lives. In 1942 when the property became part of the huge Camp Adair World War II training facility, family members buried there were reinterred from Lewisville to the new Smith Cemetery in Monmouth.

SHELDON, Thomas B. & Sarah A. Owens (both 62 Train)

Thomas (1819) & Sarah (1825) came out from Nebraska and settled in southern Polk County near Cooper’s Hollow. Their two daughters, Nancy (1849) & Lucina (1848) married Smith brothers George W. (m 5-66) & James D. (m 10-66), respectively. Sarah rests in Colfax Cemetery; Thomas Sheldon’s resting place is unknown.

SMITH, George Washington & Nancy E. Sheldon (46S & 62 Trains)

My grandmother Dora Vienna was third of eleven Smith children. After her birth her parents left in 1872 for Whitman County, Washington, attracted by the 1862 Homestead Act. Together with George’s brother Elza’s family, they founded a large orchard known as “Smith Landing,” at Penewawa on the lower Snake River. George Washington (d 1916) rests in Lee Mission Cemetery in Salem, and Nancy (d 1921) was reinterred in the Colfax Cemetery when Penewawa was flooded in the 1960s by Little Goose Dam.

SMITH, Armand C. (1865-1927) & Dora V. Smith (1871-1945) – My dad’s parents were both born in Polk County, their Smith fathers -- James Washington & George Washington – having both come west in 1846, but over different wagon routes. No relation, they met and married (1889) in Colfax, Whitman County, and had six children, my father Ross Ronald being next to last. Armand Smith was a blacksmith & equipment dealer in nearby Endicott. He and Dora rest side-by-side in Rose Cemetery in Portland.

SMITH, Ross R. (1901-90) & Matilda Mae Olsen (1900-77) – Mom was born to Norwegian emigrants in Tacoma and raised by her aunt in Spokane. Dad was born in Riparia on the Snake River, and raised in Endicott, in the heart of his beloved “Palouse” country. They met attending Washington State (now) University, the school which my grandfather’s uncle and “adoptive” father “Tom” Smith convinced fellow state senators to locate at nearby Pullman in 1889. My parents married in 1927 and lived in Spokane, where dad worked until he retired. I scattered mom’s ashes in the San Joaquin River Delta; and dad retired to Scottsdale, Arizona, where he was laid to rest.

SMITH, Ross A. (1936 -) – Born and raised in Spokane, I earned a B. A. at the University of Washington, an M. S. at San Francisco State Univ., and worked in the Bay Area until retiring to the Central Oregon Coast in 1992. I have had published several books and articles in various fields, including: “The Southern Route Revisited” in *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, Summer, 2004. My two children are Ross Ronald (1960) and Siri Lynn (1962); and my grandchildren are Nicole, Porsche and Kyle.

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Grateful Acknowledgements:

I am especially grateful to several historians and trail researchers, foremost among them Arlie Holt, my trail mentor who introduced me to my many Polk County ancestors and guided me through this early trail history. There were also Robert Marsh (who knows every claim in the county and which families migrated on every route), and Mike Barber (whose roster of the 1846 Southern Route was invaluable – see Appendix III); as well as fellow-trail-descendant and researcher Stafford Hazelett, who gave counsel and encouragement, and whose Brown & Pringle ancestors provided invaluable information on the 1846 migration and Southern Route. Likewise, trail author/historians Lowell Tiller and the late Donna Wojcik were always willing to answer my many questions regarding their definitive books on the Meek Cutoff and the overall 1845 migration. Donna and I had attended the same Spokane high school.

My late aunt Cora Smith provided the Sheldon family genealogy that initially pointed me to Polk County. Cousins Clydene Smith (Serpa) and Jennifer Perkins introduced me to the Smith & Sheldon side of my family -- Jennifer having been especially helpful in tracing family roots. Cousin Pascha Smith’s *Two Smith’s* genealogy, though imperfect, was truly invaluable. Cousin Janet Nelson provided information from having spent summers on our Riggs ancestors’ property. Cousin John McCrow showed me around the Smithfield claim on which he was raised, and cousin Larry Hubbard took me over most of the Barlow Road he lives next to on Mt. Hood. Cousins Robin Jesse and Loren Sorenson provided much information on our mutual Kimsey ancestors – including several Kimsey Newsletters, which enabled me to reconstruct a roster of our extended family’s participation in the 1846 & 1847 Barlow Roads (see Roster in Appendix II). Incidentally, cousins Smith (Serpa) and Hubbard share the increasingly rare distinction of having had grandparents on these early trail routes.

Stephenie Flora’s prodigious early trail pioneer database, which can be found at <http://www.oregonpioneers.com/ortrail.htm> must have saved me hundreds of hours of research time. Maureen Bock transcribed the McBride manuscript. Ms. Jeanne Buhler

gave me a marvelous photo of the original Riggs home, which is no longer standing on the property her family now owns and farms. Geographer Richard Rieck was very helpful in providing and discussing distances and attributes of the various routes. My son Ross R. Smith set up our “oregonoverland.com” website. My friend Jeanne George spent untold hours driving with me throughout Oregon, and rummaging in dusty libraries, helping gather data and research what proved to be well worth the effort – not only collecting the story, but also reviving our family’s heritage as part of this important period in early Oregon Trail history.