

# **OREGON OVERLAND**

**Journey to a Promised Land**

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**By Trail Descendant**

**Ross A. Smith**

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# Promised Land

*“Though 1,200 miles stretched between us and the land of promise,  
the valley of the Willamette, we were in Oregon,  
the land of our destiny ... .”\**

\*Trail chronicler John R. McBride; reported on the Fourth of July, 1846,  
upon crossing the Continental Divide and first entering into Oregon Territory.

The storm that struck on October 28, 1846, over 160 years ago was not supposed to occur until much later in the year -- not until the middle of November at the very earliest. Had the storm behaved as everyone had expected, the twin disasters that followed in its wake would surely never have happened. The Donner party would have made it safely over the Sierra-Nevada Mountains in plenty of time to avoid being snowed in for the winter. And this same early storm would not have devastated the Oregon-bound emigrants who had accompanied the Donner party across the plains, before the Donners turned off onto an untried supposed “short-cut” to California.

But as fate would have it, the large James Smith party was among those Oregon-bound trail emigrants who, like their former California-bound Donner party traveling companions, had decided to attempt an untried short-cut of their own -- this one into Oregon. This new route required them to somehow drive their wagons down a slippery, boulder-filled creek bed at the bottom of a steep precipice in Southern Oregon known as Umpqua Canyon. The late-October storm struck just as the James Smiths were preparing to coax their teams through this long, narrow passage. The resulting torrent washed away all the temporary structures the emigrants had built to make the debris-choked opening barely passable.

In the devastation that followed, our Smith party ancestors lost not only their covered wagons, but also nearly all of their belongings, and most of their supplies. They even lost their young wagon train leader, William Smith, who suddenly dropped dead from exhaustion while toiling there clearing dense brush and dead logs from that debris-clogged canyon, leaving his widow with a family of nine small children to look after.

By the middle of December, members of the snowbound Donner party were gradually starving to death, trapped there in their frozen, high-Sierra prison. Meanwhile, members of the weary Smith party trudged slowly up the flank of Oregon’s Calipooya Mountains in the rain and mud. Some walked barefoot beside their remaining animals, which were loaded with what meager supplies they had salvaged from the canyon disaster. As they gradually ascended the mountain, the rain that had drizzled steadily for weeks turned into misting snow, and the James Smith party was still over a hundred

long and difficult miles from the settlements destination they sought. Each night the shivering children stood around waiting for the warm bed clothes to be unpacked from the backs of the now wagonless oxen, so they could cover up to keep warm until a fire could be kindled. The men peeled the dry bark off of the old dead stumps, rolled big dry logs together and built big log-heap fires to get dry and warm for the night.

The children smoked wood mice from hollow logs, then dressed and roasted them on the coals, and ate them for supper. The women gathered buds and sucked leaves and bark which they knew were not poisonous, and boiled them with the blue beef from the oxen they slaughtered as the poor beasts dropped in the line of duty. Then the weary travelers drank the broth and ate the tough and tasteless meat without the salt they had run out of weeks earlier – anything to stay alive until they could reach the settlements – somehow!

At that moment these struggling, half-starved and half-frozen Oregon-bound emigrants surely did not think of themselves as instruments of national policy, but in fact that is precisely what they were. “Fifty-four-forty or Fight” was the fighting slogan first issued by James Knox Polk, in the presidential campaign of 1844. It typified the mood of the time – some emigrants had even painted this “54° 40’ ” campaign slogan on their wagon canvases. It had to do with who would eventually own the vast Oregon Territory into which the James Smith party had recently entered – co-claimants the United States or Great Britain. The United States government encouraged its citizens to settle in the territory, to strengthen its claim of outright ownership.

Thomas Hart Benton was an influential longtime U. S. Senator from Missouri, who had served from its admission after the “Missouri Compromise” of 1820. Like President Polk, the senator was a strong advocate for western expansion. Benton used his position to obtain for his son-in-law assignments which made John C. Fremont famous, exploring and mapping the vast western country: the Oregon Trail in 1842, Oregon Territory in 1844, and the Great Basin and Sierra Mountains to California in 1845.

In 1841, the U.S. Senate had approved a novel bill offered by the expansionist Senator Benton, which would donate 640 acres of land to every emigrant family who settled in Oregon. Although the bill failed in the House, its promise of free land encouraged thousands of new settlers onto the Oregon Trail, starting the next year. Without the attraction of free land, most of these early Oregon settlers might never have emigrated.

Free Land! The bill promised one square mile of farm land in Oregon’s fertile Willamette Valley, which settler families could claim by simply packing all their earthly possessions into covered wagons, and venturing 2000 miles into a little-known untamed wilderness. All they had to do was get there alive to file their claim!

In May, 1843, at about the time the first large Oregon Trail migration was leaving from Missouri, earlier Oregon settlers – most of them

trappers, traders, and some missionaries -- formed a provisional government and adopted the territory's first constitution. To foster a community of self-sufficient farmers working their own land, it provided the 640 acres of free land for any settler the Benton bill had sought.

Three year later, while two of our ancestors' Oregon-bound families were underway in the large migration of 1846, the northern boundary of the United States was finally agreed at its present location. Owing to the strength of this early American settlement, the United States got much more of the Oregon Territory than it had expected: the future "Pacific Northwest" states of Oregon, Washington, and Idaho, plus parts of Montana and Wyoming. The British settled for what is now known as British Columbia.

Four years after that, the *1850 Donation Land Claim Act* was finally passed by Congress, affirming the grant of land under the earlier provisional land law. Now their country would bestow upon these early Oregon settlers their promised land.

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I had not intended to write a book about the Oregon Trail. Actually I stumbled upon the trail quite by accident, while searching for information about my family roots. When I first began researching, I was not even aware that a certain one of my dad's grandfathers had come out west over the Oregon Trail. All I knew from a book of family genealogy my aunt had given me was that this grandfather had married in 1865 in Polk County, Oregon. It was there, while digging through dusty old county land records, that a sympathetic county employee directed me to a local historian who knew all about my dad's grandfather and his family.

This future maternal grandfather, four-year-old George Washington Smith had emigrated with the large family of his parents over the Oregon Trail in 1846. They had ended up taking a new branch of the trail known as the "Southern Route" or Applegate Trail, which entered into Oregon from the south, through the northeast corner of Mexican-owned California.

In the first few years of the Oregon Trail, the route itself ended at the Columbia River rapids (*French dalles*), where the river cut through the Cascade Mountain barrier. Emigrant families were forced to abandon their wagons at The Dalles, and transport themselves and their belongings by way of boats, canoes, and makeshift rafts, down these treacherous rapids.

This new "southern route" was one of three new routes attempted during 1845 and 1846. All three new routes were intended as a means for emigrants to bring their wagons and belongings safely *over* the mountain barrier, and directly into the Willamette Valley settlements. As I learned, this family of my Smith ancestors was among those emigrants who traveled this new "overland" route during its inaugural year.

This was fascinating information -- and there was even more to come! I also learned that two of my dad's other grandparents, as young children had

traveled with their families over the other two overland routes that were also first attempted during this brief two-year period of trail expansion. Dad's future paternal grandfather, eight-year-old James Washington Smith (no relation to George) had come with his family over the Barlow Road -- a steep and difficult new northern route across the south face of Oregon's tallest volcano. And dad's future paternal grandmother -- three-year-old Silbey Ann Riggs -- and her family had struggled over the new Meek Cut-off, which wound aimlessly through an arid central Oregon desert in the searing summer heat.

Traveling these three new "overland" wagon routes -- the Meek Cut-off in 1845, plus the Barlow Road and the Southern Route both in 1846 -- before they routes had been fully developed and were ready for travelers -- had been anything but easy. The remarkable story that emerged from my research told how three determined groups of emigrants had overcome starvation, illness, deceit, and even the tragic death of those close to them, in their struggle to reach their promised land. One of the routes caused more death than was suffered by the ill-fated Donner party. Another route was so steep emigrants had to drag 100 foot logs to slow their wagons' descent. On a third route too many of the starving emigrants did not reach the settlements until the next spring -- a full year after they had started out. And hundreds of emigrants had fared so poorly that their suffering was said by chroniclers to have been "beyond description!"

I became wholly engrossed in this fascinating story, and slowly began to fully appreciate how important developing a suitable overland wagon route had been to the early development of a "continental" America. What had begun for me as an attempt to learn of my father's roots, had evolved into a much larger story of the role these early Oregon Trail pioneers had unknowingly played in the United States realizing what President Thomas Jefferson saw as the young nation's "manifest destiny!" With the outright ownership of Oregon, continental America for the first time had extended its reach "from sea to shining sea" -- eventually reaching on across the Pacific Ocean -- opening new trade routes with China and the Orient.

Rewrite.... Their final act was in opening the door ... or drop as being like the above ... the three routes they had traveled in .... In reconnecting with our family's pioneer ancestors I had opened the door to a remarkable period of early Oregon Trail history in which they had participated. From that moment on the story had evolved from being primarily about our ancestors who had served the role of introducing me to the larger story. The story that emerged centered around the huge difficulties experienced by all the early emigrants who had participated in attempting to bring covered wagons into the settlements for the first time over the final stretch of the early Oregon Trail. Like my ancestors had done before me, I had to follow where the trail now led.

Today, our ancestors' original donation land claims have passed on to other hands, yet traces of their former presence endure, to remind us of the role they played: Smithfield Road, Smith Road, Enterprise Road, Salt Creek Store.... And their remarkable story lives on, while these ancestors remain where they can be visited today, resting there in Polk County still -- in the promised land they received as their final reward for having undertaken this long and difficult journey home to Oregon -- the "land of *their* destiny."

*Oregon Overland* recounts the story of this great adventure.

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***Lodged in thy helmet's diamond clasp  
Thy star of conquest rests at last,  
Above the tempest's gloomy track,--  
Its rays like swords of triumph crossed  
Upon the mound so newly tossed--  
The pioneer's last bivouac."***

**SAM SIMPSON**

\* From the poem "*Hood*," by our late cousin Samuel Simpson, youngest son of wagon train leader Capt. Ben Simpson and Nancy June Cooper. Both this Oregon poet-to-be and the new Barlow Road over majestic Mt. Hood were not yet one year old when the Simpson-led company in which their Smith relatives traveled was among the first ever to bring their covered wagons over this formidable Cascade mountain barrier, and on into the "promised land" -- Oregon's fertile Willamette Valley which lay just beyond.

Sam Simpson, *The Gold-Gated West*, Songs and Poems, J. B. Lippincott Co., Philadelphia & London, 1910.