OLD OREGON TRAIL WAS FAMOUS ROUTE IN PRAIRIE SCHOONER DAYS

Lot Livermore, 86 Year Old Pendleton Pioneer, Was With Party Making Great Journey Out From Ohio in 1851.

The West of today, with its railroads, automobile highways, farms, towns and cities is not the West of years ago when pioneers first heard of a wagon road to the Pacific and the eager throngs wore the old Oregon Trail deeper and deeper each year.

A Pendleton pioneer who well remembers the journey from Ohio to the Willamette Valley is Lot Livermore, aged 86, the oldest resident of the city. Mr. Livermore, with his parents, left the old home in Marietta in April, 1851. The start was made with four ox wagons, two horses and 40 cows.

Bluffs Are Reached.

Council Bluffs were reached and the Missouri river crossed May 11. "From this point we never saw the habitation of a white man until we reached the Willamette valley September 18," says Mr. Livermore.

The wagons used by the pioneers of early days were of the "Prairie schooner" type, with wooden axle, necessitating the linchpin and tar bucket. A swayback bed was provided. Indeed, "schooner" was an appropriate word, for often it was necessary to ford streams with all the household belongings in the wagon bed.

The Oregon Trail began, says Mr. Livermore, as did the Santa Fe trail, at Independence, on the Missouri river. Practically, St. Louis was the eastern terminus, men and goods going up the Missouri river to Independence, and there taking wagons and setting out for the West. The two trails were the same for 41 miles, when a signboard was seen which bore the simple words, "Road to Oregon."

Branch Trails Also.

There were branch trails that came into the road from Leavenworth and St. Joseph, striking it about the point of departure from the Santa Fe trail, but the Oregon Trail proper swung off from this fork, running steadily to the Northwest, part of the time along the Little Blue river until at last it struck the valley of the Platte. The distance from Independence to the Platte was 316 miles, the trail reaching Platte about 20 miles below the head of Grand Island. The course thence lay up the Platte Valley to the two fords near the Platte Forks.

Here was a point of departure in the olden days. If one chose to follow the South Forks, he would reach the Bayou Salade, within reach of the Spanish settlements and the head of the Arkansas, or he might take the other arm and come out on the edge of the Continental Divide, much higher to the north.

Followed Fork.

The Oregon Trail followed the South Fork for a time, then swung to the North Fork at Ash Creek. It was 667 miles to Fort Laramie, the last post on the eastern side of the Rockies. Thence the trail struggled on up the Platte, keeping close to the stream, until it reached the ford, well up toward the mountains and over 700 miles from Independence.

A little farther on the trail forsook the Platte, 807 miles out from Missouri, and swung across to the valley of the Sweetwater. The famous Independence Rock, 838 miles from Independence, was one of the most noteworthy features along the trail. It marked the entrance into the Sweetwater district and was a sort of register, holding the rudely carved names of many of the hardy Western adventurers. By the Sweetwater the Oregon trailers were taken below the foot of the Bighorns, past the Devil's Gate, and up to that remarkable crossing of the Rockies known as South Pass, where Ezra Meeker dedicated his monument under such unusual circumstances, taking water from the irrigation ditches on the east side of the Continental Divide to irrigate the west side. This is 947 miles from the Missouri river.

Goes Pacific Way.

Starting now down the Pacific side of the Great Divide, the traveler passed over 125 miles of somewhat forbidding country, crossing the Green river before he came to Fort Bridger, the first resting place west of the Rockies, 1,070 miles from the Missouri. This was a delightful spot in every way, and always welcomed by the Oregon trailers.

The Bear river was 1,136 miles from Independence, and to the Soda Springs, on the big bend of the Bear, was 1,206 miles. Thence one crossed over the height of land between the Bear and Port Neuf rivers, the latter being Columbia water; and, at a distance of 1,288 miles from Independence, reached the very important point of Fort Hall, the post established by Nathaniel Wyeth. This was the first point at which the trail struck the Snake river, that great lower arm of the Columbia which came dropping from its source opposite the headwaters of the Missouri to point out the way to the weary travelers.

The Raft river was another point of great interest; for here turned aside the arm of the transcontinental trail that led to California. This fork of the road was 1,334 miles from Missouri. Working from the Raft river, down the Great Snake Valley, touching and crossing and paralleling several different streams, the Oregon Trail proper ran until it reached the Grande Ronde Valley. The railroad today crosses the Blue Mountains at exactly the same point as the old trail did.

Umatilla Reached.

Then the route struck the Umatilla and shortly thereafter the Columbia. It was 1,934 miles to The Dalles, 1,977 to the Cascades, 2,020 to Fort Vancouver, and 2,134 to the mouth of the Columbia.

Such was the Oregon Trail traversed by hundreds and thousands of hardy adventurers. Who blazed and followed this historic highway, destined to be marked to posterity 50 years after its zenith? The Frenchman, De la Verendrye was perhaps the first to tread a portion of the trail as it is known he forsook the Missouri river and started overland, possibly up the Platte, crossing some of the country the Astorians saw later. This was in 1742. The trapper Ezekial Williams, said to have been the first white man to cross the borders of what is now Wyoming, followed in the wake of Lewis and Clark, in 1807, and blazed a part of the way. Andrew Henry, whose name was given to a beautiful lake of the Rockies; Etienne Provost, the probable discoverer of historic South Pass; Campbell, Fitzpatrick, Sublette, Jim Bridger, General Ashley, Bonneville, and Walker—these are but a few of the leaders who blazed and trod the Oregon Trail, making it a well-defined highway before Freemont set out as a "pathfinder."

Astorians Seek Way.

Then came Wilson Price Hunt, with his overland Astorians, seeking a way from the mid-Missouri to the Columbia river. Later, Robert Stuart and the returning Astorians were to mark out, east of the Continental Divide, the route of the trail for much of its length. Then came scores of trappers and traders; then Bonneville and his wagons, to deepen the trail, in 1832; and two years later, in 1834, Campbell and Sublette built old Fort Laramie on Laramie creek, a branch of the Platte. Eight years later Fort Bridger was built by Jim Bridger, on a branch of the Green river.

In 1836 two women moved out into the West along the Oregon Trail. They were the wives of Whitman and Spalding, missionaries bound for Oregon. Father de Smet, a missionary also, followed in 1840; then more missionaries from New England, and two years later Fremont, as far, at least, as the South Pass.

Mormons Appear.

In 1846-47, appeared the Mormons with their ox wagons and carts, their hand carts and wheelbarrows, to deepen the Trail and line it with their dead. Then followed the California throng on the Oregon Trail for a thousand miles or more to stir the soil that the wind might carry it away, leaving the sunken pathway a little deeper. This in 1849. Now, again came the throng—another high tide, to the Oregon country, when another ten years was tolled off and an army covered the plains—gold seekers, home builders, religionists, and adventurers of every kind. Later the Trail filled with wagons two abreast, so numerous was the throng, and two trails appeared for long stretches. The graves were common; five thousand died in the one year alone; what with the dead and dying, the panic that ensued, the intolerable dust, the parched lips and weakened frames, we may well wonder that the casualties were not greater. The Trail was then ten feet deep and a hundred wide in many places, but yet destined to be worn deeper and deeper by the return tide of stock in the fullness of time, a million a year for many years, tramping the graves into dust and wearing the Trail into almost incredible widths and depths—fifteen feet deep and two hundred feet wide in one place encountered.

Many Leave Homes.

It is a wonderful story, that of the growth of the Oregon Trail. Why so many home builders with their families plunged into the then unknown wilderness across so wide a stretch of what was known as the 'Great American Desert," no man can tell. Certain it is that no such record in the world's history can be found of so many people going so long a distance to found an empire, as they did, over the two thousand miles stretch of the Oregon Trail. So long as this mystery or romance remains there will continue an abiding interest in this unsolved problem. Lovers hastened their union that they might share the danger and privation together across the unknown stretch; sedate heads of families as mysteriously were moved to risk all, that they might see the farther West; young men boldly moved out on the plains as if it were only a great "playground" where the sport of the chase would continue forever. It would seem that manifest destiny prompted the multitude, whatever may have ultimately governed their action. Three hundred thousand people traversed the Oregon Trail to beyond the summit of the Rocky Mountains and passed through that great rift in the mountains, the South Pass. Nature had provided and pointed the way and in time was unfolded the final climax when the great wagon trains began to roll through that wonderful break in the mountains, the South Pass of the Rocky Mountains.

Mystery Shrouds Pass.

Mystery surrounds the real discovery of the "Pass." In prehistoric times the buffalo wore trails over the summit. We know as little as to when the Indians followed. As already said, Nature had pointed the way. The melting snows of mid-winter storms descending from the higher levels formed the little river, Sweetwater, which in turn emptied into the North Platte, and this in its turn formed its junction with the South Branch and thence rolled placidly as a mighty river to the greater Missouri. To follow the Oregon Trail to within two miles of the summit of the South Pass is to follow up the current of the waters described; the route of the least resistance destined again to become the Nation's highway, to the higher altitudes above the clouds and almost up to the perpetual snow line, 7,450 feet above sea level.

Now we are over the summit and look out westward over a vast plateau of high altitude a hundred miles or more before we begin to descend into the Bear river valley, and down Bear river a short way and we are near the Snake, which we follow, and finally to the Columbia and the tide waters of the Pacific.

Lewis and Clark, in 1805, finally reached and descended the Snake and Columbia, and that far were on the general route of the Oregon Trail; then came Hunt with his Astor party to traverse a part in 1911-12, but the key, the South Pass, has not been discovered yet, and not until ten years later a party of trappers found and crossed over through the Pass. This was in 1822 or 1823. Yet another 10 years elapsed before any one person passed over the whole of the Oregon Trail. The glory of that achievement belongs to N. J. Wyeth, an intrepid Bostonian, who crossed with his wagons, following the wagon track already dimly worn a hundred miles west of the summit by other trappers and traders.

River is Crossed.

In 1843 nearly a thousand men, women and children crossed the Missouri river, traversed the Platte valleys, crossed the Rockies through the South Pass, thence to the Snake and Columbia; the first wagon train that ever reached the Pacific coast and the first real migration of builders to the Pacific Slope. These people had come from widely scattered districts of the United States and pitched their tents near the buffalo herds on the western border of civilization. The Oregon question was not settled and hung in the balance. The Lynn bill granting 640 acres of land to each family, had passed the senate. Whitman, the missionary, had returned overland the previous winter to save his mission, and preached Oregon in season and out of season. The government was organizing an expedition under the leadership of Fremont to penetrate the dark country, of which so little was known.

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