

NACHES PASS TRAIL JUDSON ACCT.

Katharine Berry Judson, "The Naches Pass Trail," Early Days in Old Oregon. Portland: Binford and Mort, 1916, p. 167-177.

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In early days all emigrants, after crossing the plains and the mountains to Fort Walla Walla, went down the Columbia River to the Willamette Valley, by trail or by boat. At first no settlements at all were made anywhere else than in the Willamette Valley and the adjoining valleys, such as the Clackamas and the Tualatin.

The first settlers in the Puget Sound country went there in 1846. Michael Simmons, a rough though honest man, was one of them; and George Bush, a mulatto, was another. There were only a half-dozen altogether. Emigrants had not gone north before that because the British expected to be given the country north of the Columbia, and they did not encourage emigration there.

Two other important reasons were, that there was no farming country open to settlement north of the river, and the Indians were wilder, so there was more danger. North of the Columbia, except the lands used by the Hudson's Bay Company for their farming, there were only dense forests. Lumbering and fishing were the only possible ways open to emigrants of earning money.

When the boundary line was settled, however, in 1846, the Columbia River was not the dividing line. Most of the Puget Sound country was given to America. The discovery of gold in California made timber and piles and shingles necessary, and settlers began to log-off the lands around Puget Sound. They wrote east to their friends of the pleasant climate and the beautiful country and the great tracts of land to be had for the taking. Many emigrants for the Puget Sound country, therefore, came across the plains to Fort Vancouver, then up the Cowlitz River and over the old Cowlitz trail to Olympia.

There had long been a rumor of a good Indian trail from Fort Walla Walla across the Cascade Mountains to Puget Sound. If this was true it would save much time and travel, for emigrants could cross the mountains from the Yakima Valley and save perhaps two hundred miles or more. In 1853, word was sent to immigrants, even before they reached the Blue Mountains of Oregon, that a road had been cut through the forests of the Cascade Mountains, and that it would be easier for them to reach the Sound by the old Indian trail and the new road than by way of Fort Vancouver. So many travelers of that year tried to reach the Sound country direct by the route through the Nachess Pass.

One summer night a party was camping in the Grande Ronde, that "Great Circle," in the Blue Mountains. The broad, grassy valley was twenty miles across, walled by high mountains. Through the green valley ran streams of ice-cold water, delicious after the dust of the waterless

lava plains. Many tall trees grew there, though the forest was not dense. Wildflowers glowed among the green grass. It was a charming place in which to encamp.

In the Grande Ronde that night a ten year old boy named George [Himes] was playing with his baby sister, a blue eyed, golden-haired little girl of about a year old. Thirty six of the white-winged prairie schooners of the immigrants were near by. George's father was looking after his tired horses, and other fathers after their oxen. The mothers were cooking supper.

Suddenly a number of "horse Indians" rode up. They had dressed in their best to visit the white men. Buckskin shirts they wore, and legging beaded in many colors, with brightly colored porcupine quills. Hawk's bells fastened on their shirts tinkled as they moved. Feathers were in their hair. The beaded buckskin saddle blankets of their ponies were edged with deep buckskin fringe which swept the ground. They had come to see how the white people cooked and dressed and ate and lived. Those things always interested the Indians.

A fine-looking chief—really a famous chief—named Peo-Peo-mox-mox, came over to watch George play with the baby. Carefully he watched the two for an hour, then he went away. And soon after supper both the golden haired baby and George were sound asleep.

Early the next morning, before the sun rose, some of the men went to look after the oxen and horses. To their surprise they found hundreds of beautiful Indian ponies grazing near their camp. Soon they met Indians driving in more ponies. At once they knew the Indians wanted to buy something. And what do you suppose they wanted? That blue-eyed, yellow-haired baby! The famous chief had watched George play with her so that he might know how to do it after he had bought her.

Baby's mother said "No! Not for hundreds of ponies would she sell her baby girl. And the "Great chief who had come to get her rode sorrowfully away, striking his chest and saying, "My heart is very sick."

As soon as breakfast was over that morning, the procession of wagons started on again. There were thirty-six of them, and one hundred and forty-five persons, including the little children. They left the Grande Ronde, passed on by Fort Walla Walla, and started for Puget Sound by this new road over the mountains. The year was 1853.

First they had to cross the Columbia River. There was no boat there to use as a ferry. It took four days to saw planks out of driftwood, just to make a clumsy raft to get across the river.

Once across that river, the procession of prairie schooners went north to the Yakima Valley, following the Yakima River up through that valley where Alexander Ross had traded for horses with the Indians thirty-five years before. The river banks were higher, sometimes on one side and sometimes on another, so they had to cross the river eight times to keep as much as possible on fairly level ground.

Then the travelers came to the Nachess River, as it wound and twisted through the mountains—and how many times do you think they crossed that? Sixty-eight times. One driver cut a notch in

his whip-handle every time they crossed. Others counted up to fifty and then lost count. Sometimes, instead even of crossing straight over, they had to drive up the river bed, with the oxen stumbling about in the loose stones and plunging now and then into deeper water, travel up the river for a mile before they could find a bank low enough to allow them to land. Where the water was high, it came into the wagon box and things got wet.

Besides crossing that river so many times, they had to travel through sagebrush as high as the wagon. The oxen had to crush it down before they could pass through it. The worst of it was that the poor beasts had almost nothing to eat. For fifty miles on the east side of the mountains there was no grass—nothing but the tips of alder and maple trees along the river bank. Both the oxen and the people were worn out by the time they reached the forest.

If these immigrants had been fur traders with pack horses, and with no women or children, the problem would have been much easier than it was. The trail really was well known and much used by the Indians. But it is one thing to go through such a country with pack ponies, however heavily laden, and quite another to drive oxen pulling their heavy, cumbersome wagons, with four great clumsy wheels. An Indian pony could travel forty miles or more while such a wagon was going four.

When these immigrants reached the dense forests of the Cascade Mountains, words cannot tell their hardships.

They learned afterwards that settlers on Puget Sound had sent out men to cut the trees and clear a road through the forest. Indians, however, told these men, before they had done much work, that the white people had gone down the Columbia, on the usual route. So the road makers shouldered their axes and went home.

Many immigrants had indeed that summer gone down the Columbia; but these thirty-six wagons had not.

These poor people could not go back. They could not travel again down the Nachess Valley and the Yakima with their starved oxen. The oxen would have died on the way, and probably many of the people also. At best, it would be full winter before any of them could reach Fort Vancouver. There was nothing to do but cut their way through that forest.

Every man, woman, and child had to help in that awful road-making. The stronger men went ahead with axes and cut down the trees; others pulled the smaller trunks, when cut down, to one side, or chopped a passage through the larger ones. Trees which had fallen years before, and which blocked the forest in every direction, had to be cut through or cleared away. Then the women and children came after, hacking away at the undergrowth and the saplings, and pulling the lighter rubbish out of the way. Hungry and ragged, barefooted and almost naked, the little children, with their hatchets, hacked away at the underbrush.

It was fearful work. The trees were large, and even the stumps left by the choppers were almost too high to drive over. They caught under the wagon beds of the heavy schooners, and the thin, weak oxen pulled almost in vain to get the wagon over. And not a single foot of that road was

level. They were either going down a steep slope of some kind, or up a more gradual ascent. Do their best, they could not gain more than three miles a day, and their food was giving out.

But on they pushed until they reached a point twenty five miles south of Mount Rainier. Then the foremost wagon stopped; the ones behind had also to stop. Something was the matter. Groups of men and women hurried forward, and stood near the leading team. They talked and they wept. The men were arguing. George and his mother hurried forward to see what the trouble was. George's mother saw it first. She said, "Well, I guess we have come to the jumping-off place."

Directly in front of them the ground dropped away in a sheer bluff. For thirty feet or more it was straight up and down. Below that was a long, steep slope. No ox could stand on that slope, even alone; much less with a heavy wagon pushing on his heels. Nothing but a fly could stand upright on that sheer bluff. Men and women said to each other, "We can never go down there."

So the men began to search for another road, or another trail over the mountains. There was none. All about them were hills. It was either go down that hill or go back. To go back was impossible. It was go ahead or starve.

One man in that train had a piece of rope one hundred and eighty feet long. He had coiled it under the wagon box when he left the Missouri River, not knowing when or where it might be needed. Now when it was so badly needed, he drew out the staples that fastened it. Yet when a man took one end of it and slid down the hill to see if it was long enough, they saw it was too short.

One of the immigrants, James Byles, said: "Kill one of the poorest of my oxen. Make a rope of his hide, and fasten it to the end of this rope."

They did so. Yet the rope was still too short. They killed another ox, and another, and still another. Four oxen they killed in all, cutting the green hide into strips, knotting the ends together, and fastening all to the end of the rope. At last there was enough.'

In getting down the wagons, great care had to be taken. All the oxen but one pair were taken off the foremost wagon. One end of the rope was tied to the hind wheel, the rope twisted around a near by tree and "paid out" slowly, to prevent the wagon from plunging down the hill. The oxen put their feet together and slid down the bluff on their haunches —it was too steep to go down any other way. The wagon was held from crashing down upon them by the rope.

After they got to the end of the rope, the wheels of the wagon were "rough-locked"; then small trees, with the branches still on, were cut down and fastened to the rear wheels. These acted as a drag and the branches increased the resistance. So the oxen dragged the wagon down a quarter of a mile farther to the foot of the hill, where camp was made for the night.

Each wagon had to go down in that way, and it was slow, slow work. Two wagons were wrecked, and some provisions lost. The wreck of the wagons was not so serious, but the loss of the food was.

After reaching the bottom of this hill, the immigrants were almost at the foot of the Cascade Mountains. Yet they were still a long distance, with such teams as theirs were then, from Puget Sound.

The oxen were unfastened and driven forward to a prairie, afterwards known as Connell's prairie, to feed. They were too weak to pull anything. The men stayed with the oxen. The women and children stayed with the wagons in the forest. A few days later the oxen were brought back and hitched to the wagons, but they were still very weak. So everyone walked.

By this time, things were desperate. The food had given out and the travelers were almost starved. Men were sent ahead on horseback to ask the settlers around Puget Sound to send them food. But no one knew whether the message would reach the settlers, or whether help could come. The messengers might even be lost in the forest.

The horses and oxen belonging to George's father were so worn out he decided to stay with them on the prairies for a few days. Even had he gone back with them, the family would have had to walk, just as everyone did. So ten-year-old George was left to take care of his mother, the baby sister, a little sister of seven, and a small brother of three.

Eating a few berries on the way, as they could find them, the travelers started on foot for Connell's prairie. George sometimes carried the baby, sometimes loaded his little brother on his back, while the mother carried the baby, and the seven-year-old sister kept close by.

One afternoon they came to the White River. It was too deep to ford, so the teams had to go down stream a mile to find a ford. One of the men cut down a tree to serve as a bridge. It was so large a tree that it crossed the river, but at the farther end the tip was partly under water and the current made it sway.

When they came to that tree-bridge, everyone was ahead of George and his mother and the children. The mother said she must rest; so George took the little sister across on the log, set her down in the bushes, and came back for his brother. With those two safely across, he took the baby over and left her with the other children. Then he went back again for his mother.

George took his mother's hand and helped her over, but she was very tired. When she reached the farther end of the log, where it swayed in the current, she lost her balance and fell into the river. George quickly caught at some bushes with one hand and his mother's dress with the other. He held her until she could climb up on the log again. She wrung out her wet skirts and they went on two miles farther, where she gave out, and they all had to stop.

They were over the worst of things by this time, but they were quite alone because the others had all reached Connell's prairie, which was not very far ahead. But the mother could go no farther. Leaving the children with her, George started off to find his father. Then they two, father and son, carried the worn-out mother to the camp fire, and went back again after the three little children whom they had had to leave alone in the forest at twilight.

Yet even then, at the prairie, all the food there was to eat was a few baked potatoes. All day long,

they had eaten nothing except a few berries; and for days before that they had been almost starved.

But at last these brave people were over the mountains and out of the forest. The settlers who were living in their log cabins on Puget Sound, near what is now Olympia, sent men to them with bacon and potatoes and flour. The Hudson's Bay Company, from Fort Nisqually, sent beef to them and vegetables, so there was no longer any danger of starvation. And at last they were safe.

They said afterwards that even the little piece of road which the axe-men had cut had been so badly done that it was no road at all—nothing but a good pony trail. But the next summer workmen were again sent out, and this time they cut a road clear through the forests and over the mountains. It was a rough road, but no immigrants after that ever had such a fearful struggle to get through the forest, or were in such danger of starvation.