

A NOTE ON THE NACHES PASS ROAD OF 1853 BY THEODORE WINTHROP (Theodore Winthrop. *The Canoe and The Saddle*. Portland; Binfords and Mort, 1955. ppgs 62-66, 74-76

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I had heard indefinitely that a party of Boston men, for so all Americans are called in the Chinook jargon, were out from the settlements of Puget Sound, viewing, or possibly opening a way across the Cascades, that emigrants of this summer might find their way into Washington Territory direct, leaving the great overland caravan route near the junction of the two forks of the Columbia. Such an enterprise was an epoch in progress. It was the first effort of an infant community to assert its individuality and emancipate itself from the tutelage of Oregon.

Very soon the Boston hooihut became apparent. An Indians trail came into competition with a civilized man's rude beginnings of a road. Wood-choppers had passed through the forest, like a tornado, making a broad belt of confusion. Trim Boston neighborhoods would have scoffed at this rough and tumble cleft of the wild wood, and declined being responsible for its title. And yet two centuries before this tramp of mine, my progenitors were cutting just such paths near Boston.

I was compelled to violate the law of my nature, to identify myself with conservatism, and take the ancient Indian trail instead of the modern highway. Stiff as the obstacles in the trail might be, the obstacles of the road were still stiffer; stumps were in it, fresh cut and upstanding with sharp or splintered edges; felled trunks were in it, with wedge-shaped huts and untrimmed branches, forming impregnable abattis.

One might enter those green bowers as a lobster enters the pot; extrication was another and a tougher task. Every inch of the surface was planted with laming caltrops and the saplings and briars that once grew there elastic were now thrown together, a bristling hedge. A belt of forest had been unmade and nothing made.

Patriotic sympathy did indeed influence me to stumble a little way along this shaggy waster. I aunced my train into this complexity, floundered awhile in one of its unbridged bogs and wrestled in its thorny labyrinths, until so much of my patience as was not bemired was flagellated to death by scorpion scourges of briars. I trod these mazes until even my guide show signs of disgust and my horse, an ungainly plodder, could only be propelled by steady discipline of thwacks.

I gave up my attempt to be a consistent radical. I shook off the shavings and splinters of a pioneer chaos, and fell back into primeval ways.

Though I had abandoned their undone road I was cheered to have met fresh traces of my countrymen. Their tree surgery was skillful. No clumsy, tremulous hand had done butchery here

with haggling axe. The chopping was the handiwork of artists, men worthy to be regicide headsmen of forest monarchs. By their cleavage light first shone into this gloaming; the selfish grandeures of this incognito earth were open to day.

A score of men were grouped about the fire. Several had sprung up alert at the crashing of our approach. Others reposed untroubled. Others tended viands odoriferous and fizzing. Others stirred the flame. Around, the forest rose, black as Erebus, and the men moved in the glare against the gloom like pitmen in the blackest of coal-mines.

I became at once the center of a red-flannel shirted circle. The recumbents stood on end. The cooks let their frying pans bubble over while, in response to looks of expectation. I hung out my handbill, and told the society my brief and simple tale. I was not running away from any fact in my history. A harmless person, asking no favors, with plenty of pork and spongy biscuit in his bags, only going home across the continent, if may be, and glad, gentlemen pioneers of this unexpected pleasure.

My quality thus announced, the boss of the road-makers without any dissenting voice, offered me the freedom of their fireside. He called for fatted pork, that I might be entertained right republicanly. Every cook proclaimed supper ready.

Each man's target flapjack served him for platter and edible-table. Coff, also, for beverage, the fraternal cooks set before us in infrangible tin pots, coffee ripened in its red husk by Brazilian suns thousands of leagues away, that we, in cool Northern forests might feel the restorative power of its concentrated sunshine, feeding vitality with fresh fuel.

But for my graminivorous steeds, gallopers all day long in rough, unflinching steeple chase, what had nature done here in the way of provender? Alas! little or naught. This camp of plenty for me was a starvation camp for them... Only a modicum of my soaked and fungous hard-tack could be spared to each. They turned upon me melancholy, reproachful looks, they suffered and I could only suffer sympathetically. Poor preparation for the toil ahead. But fat prairies also are ahead; have patience, empty mustangs.

My hosts were a stalwart gang...

When they laughed, as only men fresh and hearty and in the open air can laugh, the world became mainly grotesque; it seemed at once a comic thing to live... a thing to roar at, that we had all met there from the wide world, to hob-nob by a frolicsome fire with tin pots of coffee, and partake of crisped bacon and toasted doughboys in ridiculous abundance.

Easy laughter infected the atmosphere. Echoes ceased to be pensive, and became jocose. A rattling humor pervaded the forest and Green River rippled with noise of fantastic jollity.

Men who slash with axes in Oregon woods need not be chary of fuel. They fling together boles and branches enough to keep any man's domestic Lares warm for a winter. And over this vast pyre flame takes its spendid pleasure with corybantic dances and roaring paeans of victory. Fire, encouraged to do its work fully, leaves no unsightly grim corpses on the field. The glow of embers

wastes into the pallor of thin ashes; and winds may clear the spot, drifting away and sprinkling upon brother trees faint, filmy relics of their departed brethren.

While fantastic flashes were still leaping up and illumining the black circuit of forest, every man made his bed, laid down his blankets in starry bivouac, and slept like a mummy. The camp became vocal with snores; nasal with snores of various calibre with the forest.

They died away into the music of my dreams, a few moments seemed to pass, and it was day.

The road-builders had insisted that I should be their guest (for breakfast.), partaking not only of the fire, air and water of their bivouac, but of an honorable share at their feast. Hardly had the snoring of the snorers ceased when the frying of the fryers began.

In the pearly gray mists of dawn, purple shirts were seen busy about the kindling pile; in the golden haze of sunrise, cooks brandishing pans over fierce coals raking from the red hot jaws of flame that champed their breakfast of fir logs.

Rashers doughboys, not without molasses, and coffee, a bill of fare identical with last night's were our morning meal, but there was absolute change of circumstance to prevent monotony.

We had daylight instead of firelight, freshness instead of fatigue, and every man flaunted a motto of "Up and doing!" instead of trailing a drooping flag, inscribed with "Done in."

As I started the woodsmen gave me a salute. Down, to echo my shout of farewell, went a fir of fifty years standing. It cracked sharp, like the report of a howitzer and crashed downward, filling the woods with shattered branches. Under cover of this first shot, I dashed at the woods. I could ride more boldly forward into savageness, knowing that the front ranks of my nation were following close behind.