

NACHES PASS TRAIL. ERNST ACCT.

Clara Woodin Ernst. Pioneers Now and then. Portland, Oregon: The Metropolitan Press, 1955, p. 5-15].

Milton Woodin and his family, no doubt actuated by the processes, but utterly unaware of it then,, moved again, this time to Berrien County, Michigan. It was here his wife passed away and was buried in Boyer cemetery, at Millburg. A short time later they were again on the move.

With his twenty-year old son Ira, daughter Annie, her husband Seymore Wetmore and their children, he joined an ox-team caravan, westward bound. Birdsey Wetmore, Annie's and Seymore's youngest child, was but twelve days old as they passed Polk County, Iowa, in May 1853. (He was six months old before he arrived at Fort Steilacoom.)

There were but four wagons as the train left Michigan. Each was drawn by three yokes of oxen. All were heavily loaded with provisions and equipment for the journey that no one had more than a hazey idea of its needs. At Kenosha, Wisconsin, they were joined by another small group, headed for the same destination, Fort Steilacoom on Puget Sound. Whether by accident or design, it is not definitely known, but they did combine their trains and continued on toward Council Bluffs, Iowa, a recognized gathering place for western-bound wagon-trains.

The Kenosha party was headed by William Mitchell, Samuel Holms and a number of others, some with their families, and a few young bachelors who tended the stock and did scouting chores, made up a caravan slightly larger than the Woodin train.

About the same time, Bennett Johns, with a very large family, including son-in-law, Bennett Lewis, along with an undetermined number of others, left Tennessee, also headed for Puget Sound, with Council Bluffs as their jumping-off point.

Council Bluffs was a natural center. It had been a gathering place used by the Indians for as far back as their memory extended. Indian councils had been held there in the shelter of its bluffs, and so the name, most naturally, continued to be used by the white man. Every kind of frontier life seethed and boiled in Council Bluffs during the 1840s and 50s.

Assembling western-bound emigrants, on the loose; suppliers of all sorts, prospering through the sale of huge quantities of supplies by the train load; and of course the gamblers, sharpers, and just plain leaches and hangers-on, provided a gay and boisterous, sometimes tragic setting for the founders and builders (to be) of the great northwest as they launched their creeping covered-wagon trains for a journey whose suffering and hardships they could not possibly comprehend in advance. Their urge was a new, free home and their guide a star of hope.

At Council Bluffs the Woodin, Wetmore, Mitchell and Johns parties joined forces in what was later to be known as the second contingent of the famous Longmire train.

Almost at the same time (March 1853) a group consisting of thirty-one families, headed by James Longmire, left Franklin County, Indiana. Their destination was some still undetermined

point on the northwest coast, probably Portland. As they journeyed westward, events occurred to focus their attention on Puget Sound.

Fort Steilacoom, a new army post recently established there, gave promise of protection and a point from which food might be had in emergencies. The newer country held offers of a better land selection than the older Willamette Valley and so at some time along the route and prior to the time the party reached Wallula, the main caravan decided on Puget Sound.

The Longmire Diary tells of camping twelve miles below Council Bluffs while waiting to get the ferry. They crossed the Missouri River on May 10, 1853.

The Woodin, Mitchell and Johns contingent, having been delayed in crossing Iowa because of the deep mud in which their wagons sank to the axles in numerous places, didn't get across the Missouri until June third.

It is not known where, when or if there had been previous plans made between the several groups that finally made up the two parties, but James Longmire is credited with calling the two groups, two sections of one—the Longmire Train, and list the names in each. So there must have been contacts. Other accounts of the eventful trip indicate that the same people were, at different times, in each of the groups, and so it must be concluded that as the long trains slowly wended their way across plains, the distances between, shortened and lengthened in varying degrees, according to the fortunes of travel that overtook each in turn.

Stampeding buffalo herds, brushes with hostile Indians, accidents to wagons, frequent illnesses, births and deaths enroute, were all factors that could widen or close the gap between the two sections.

The first section, although having a twenty-two day start, was much larger, and for that reason alone, slower. To the first section also fell the responsibility of picking the route, since it was undoubtedly the first train over that particular spring. They probably also lost some time in selecting river crossings, that the second section had only the trail left by the first, to follow.

Although a diligent search has revealed no positive proof, the various accounts from available sources indicate that the two sections were together where Pendleton, Oregon now stands. It was here that those bound for Portland or the Willamette Valley took the old, previously-traveled trail that led down the Columbia River.

There were twenty-one people in that party, one of whom was Ira Woodin, of the second section that crossed the plains. Ira's father, Milton Woodin went with the main party to cross the Naches Pass.

The tales of hardship, hunger and suffering endured by every member of each of the many covered-wagon trains as they crossed plains and mountains to the last new frontier have been told and re-told many times, but it is doubtful if their full purport has filtered into the consciousness of even the most attentive listener.

Who, today, can entirely comprehend the anxious days preceding and during the birth of a child under such circumstances? Who can understand what it must have meant to bury a wife and mother on that dusty, barren wagon trail, taking only time enough to dig a grave and hurry on, expecting it to be ravaged by animal or savage? There were many such instances in the Woodin train. What parent today could possibly know what it would mean to bury a little toddler there in the storm-swept lonesomeness and hurry on to the plodding train ahead, hoping to forget the picture that would never, never leave?

Two young men of the Woodin contingent, one day started ahead of the train on foot. In late afternoon when the train caught up with them, one had been murdered and the other so badly wounded that he died soon after. They paused long enough to bury both men, and the train moved on. The following day other emigrants caught up with the Woodin outfit.

They told how both bodies had been dug up and scalped, and the burial blankets taken. The informers told further how they had reburied the bodies in the middle of the trail they would pursue and the whole following train drove over the new graves, in the hopes of eliminating the last trace of their location.

Stampeding buffalo herds at times, necessitated a quickly made break in an emigrant train to allow them through, with the alternative of being trampled to death.

Fatigue beyond the endurance of some of the weaker members, lack of proper food and at times, lack of any at all, helped the vicious mountain fever take its toll and make more graves, never to be again visited by the victim's loved ones.

The 1853 covered wagon trail was strewn with broken, deserted wagons, stoves, once-prized furniture intended to make a home with-memories in some yet-to-be-built log cabin, on some still to be found site in an unknown west—everything that could possibly lighten the load behind weak and worn oxen was discarded. Some had hastily-made signs inviting followers to "help themselves", in the hopes that some treasure might find a home where it would be prized as its owner had once hoped it could be for herself.

Everywhere, bleaching bones of cattle that could go no farther—and had given their lives to the cause, told a mute story of their own of how even animals used their last drop of energy and then perhaps gave their remaining strings of flesh, that their owners might struggle forward.

Every mile through hostile Indian country brought its attendant strain on nerves. There was constant fear of attack, and some actual attacks, that ended in additional graves along the trail. Attempted stampedes of grazing cattle in the night, were sometimes successfully executed by Indians, and wagons, for want of oxen to draw them the following day, were abandoned.

River crossings took their toll as well. Wagon-beds, caulked with grudgingly-spared rags, became boats in which women and children were ferried over streams, while men and livestock swam, seldom without some loss of cattle or equipment and sometimes, life.

Each crossing took precious time both for organizing and planning on one side, and reforming on

the other, but the indomitable spirit of those men and women self-selected for the job ahead, physically bred and reared to endure its severity; and mentally disciplined to meet, accept and conquer the very worst the trail could conceive, drove them on.

For those who chose the route down the Columbia River to Portland or the Willamette Valley, the trail was known. It had been traveled a number of times previously, but for James Longmire and his party, who chose to cross through the Naches Pass, from Fort Walla Walla on, they would be -blazing an entirely new one. Not only was it a new route, but there was no assurance that the Cascades could be crossed. They had only the setting sun and the somewhat questionable direction offered by Indians whose language no member of the caravan could understand, to guide them.

They didn't know it then, but General George B. McClellan had been sent out from Fort Steilacoom a few weeks before, to find a wagon road across the Cascades. He reported that such a feat was fantastic and impossible of accomplishment.

The apparently friendly chief of the Cayuses, Peopeomoxmox, welcomed the party at Wallula by killing one of his "best and fattest steers and sold us the meat for fifteen cents a pound," Mr. Longmire has been reported as saying. He also gave them valuable~ assistance in crossing the Columbia from Wallula, guided them along its west bank to the mouth of the Yakima River and again helped them across to its north bank.

They were followed by thousands of Indians, according to the same report, who were seeing their first wagons or "land canoes" as the Indians termed them.

The Longmire train crossed and re-crossed the Yakima River numerous times between its mouth and some twenty miles west, where they finally left it at a point near the present Kiona. Historians don't agree on the number. Some make it as many as eight, although it would necessarily have to be an odd number since they left the river on the opposite side.

To know the territory there, is to speculate as to just why more than one crossing was found necessary or even advisable. It is more to be wondered why they would leave the Yakima Valley, its apparently easy travel and its ample river-supplied water, to cross the Rattlesnake Hills into what proved to be an entirely dry country.

But the record shows that they did, as well as indicates a time-consuming confusion that is entirely foreign to a group of people who had found their almost direct way for some two thousand miles across plains and mountains. Surely there is some explanation for their unusual maneuvering.

One account states that, through signs and gestures, they informed the Indians that they wanted to "go where the soldiers were stationed". Attempting to answer their question, the Indians drew two routes in the sand, one leading north and the other in a northwesterly direction. On each they marked crosses each cross indicating one night's stop.

Since the route headed north had fewer crosses, the caravan chose it, but when they came to

steep white bluffs rising almost perpendicularly from the opposite bank of the Columbia River, they retraced their tracks and took the longer indicated route, that led northwesterly through the present Moxee Valley.

Some historians report that members of the caravan felt it to be an innocent mistake, due to language difficulties. That could easily be, because there were two points where soldiers were stationed, one Colville, reached by one of the routes traced in the sand by the Indians, and taken first by the wagon train; and the other, Steilacoom, the Longmire train's destination. The wagon train leaders understood the Indians to mean two routes to Fort Steilacoom.

But there are other accounts that report quite the opposite Indian attitude, maybe to add color to the story, possibly to raise antagonism toward the Indian, or maybe because the story was true. It will probably remain an unanswered question. It is an established fact that Kamiakin, then chief of the Yakima Nation strongly opposed encroachment of the whites.

There are tales of the train being harassed and delayed, of nightly raids and of tossing live toads into some dinner-pot as meals were being prepared at the night stops. This when added to the misdirection, could indicate that there might have been an organized travel-hampering campaign. If there was, who could blame the Indians, whose country it was, for attempting to discourage further encroachment on their domain?

The Longmire train continued up the Moxee Valley, crossed the Yakima River again and entered Pleasant Valley on the Selah side of the river. From there they traveled into the Wenatchee and on September 20, 1853, camped some twelve miles above the present town of Selah. A granite monument, placed on the spot by Pioneers of Yakima, exactly sixty-four years later, today marks the camp-site.

Twelve days had been consumed since crossing the Columbia River at Wallula. The most direct route by today's paved highway between Wallula and the monument marking the September 20 camping place, is a distance of one hundred twenty miles. The route taken by the Longmire train must have been at least twenty, or more, miles farther.

When it is realized that their trip included eight, or perhaps more river crossings, plus a couple of days being consumed in back-tracking from White Bluffs, the feat of maneuvering a train of thirty-six covered wagons and one hundred fifty-three people with numbers of loose cattle to be watched over and cared for constantly over the uncharted distance, in twelve days, is a remarkable accomplishment.

But the worst was yet to come.

The train continued on up the Wenatchee Valley for some twelve miles. At that point they crossed over a dividing ridge into the Naches, reaching the Naches River a mile or so above the spot where the Nile Creek empties into it.

For most of its distance from the Nile to its source, the Naches River is a swift mountain stream that tumbles down through a rocky, timbered gorge. This was to be the guide for the emigrant

wagon train to the summit of the Cascades. At times, the stream widened out over a flat gravelly bottom which permitted wagons to travel in the stream itself, while at other points, the swift water and narrow gorge drove the train to its bank, where a road-way had to be cut through the covering timber. At times, travel was slowed to as little as two miles in a day.

It was October 1, when after crossing the Naches River sixty eight times, the trail-blazing caravan reached the summit of the Cascade Mountains. Since leaving the Wenas camp (September 20), some sixty miles and ten days time were behind the tired, hungry and thoroughly worn, but still determined travelers.

It had been seven months since they had left their Eastern homes. Seven months of slow, ox-team, covered-wagon plodding over plains and rugged mountains; experiencing sickness, births and deaths. Seven months of anxiety. Seven months of preparing campfire meals, many times too meager to merit the name. Now they were at the summit of the last mountain range. From here on the rest of the trip would be down hill and should, by comparison, be easy.

But that was not to be.

Barring their way, an almost perpendicular cliff with no discoverable way around, faced them. They couldn't remain there long, for it was already October. Food and supplies were almost gone. No single member of the party that had come the distance to this point, entertained a thought of retracing their route, for one single moment. One thing only remained—go on to Puget Sound. But how?

Let the wagons down with ropes, snubbed to a tree, suggested someone. Collecting every foot of rope from the entire party, when spliced together produced a line still many feet short of the required length.

But the resourcefulness of men and women of the stamp who would embark on such a venture in the first place; and who had met and surmounted the hundreds of new situations the seven months and thousands of miles behind them had presented, simply couldn't be stopped now.

Three cattle were slaughtered—cattle that would be so badly needed in their new home—cattle that had been brought all of those thousands of miles. Their hides were cut into strips and braided into ropes, which when added to accumulated, spliced rope, made one of sufficient length to let wagons down, one at a time—all thirty-six of them.

It stands today as the most remarkable feat of the hundreds performed by the many wagon-train emigrants who crossed plains and mountains to pioneer a new frontier. Had General George McClellan who had a few weeks earlier declared that the idea of wagons crossing the Cascades was a wispy, fantastic dream, been faced with the same necessity as the Longmire train, he too might have found a way. But he didn't.

One hundred years later, to celebrate the great outstanding accomplishment, a young man with modern cable and pulleys, let ONE wagon down the same place. Even with modern devices, the stunt was regarded as a very dangerous undertaking. It drew spectators from as far away as New

York, and made front pages of newspapers across the nation. The stunt was staged in mid-summer, but the Longmire train, unable to select the most favorable date, staged their feat in October.

The matter of exact dates seems a little hazy. Different members of the train vary in accounts of the same incident and usually qualify them with saying "about such and such a date". Probably exact dates were the very least concern to hungry, fearful and anxious people who were enduring hardships known to have existed among them; and who, weakened and worn by their long hazardous trip, were now stranded in mountains at the beginning of winter, so near to their destination yet threatened with the likelihood of never reaching it.

One member of the train, Mr. G. H. Himes leaves a record that says "He believes that they reached the Nisqually Plains about October 10 or 12. Mr. Longmire is credited with the statement that according to his best recollection, they were still at the summit of the mountains on October 8.

Of the second section of the train that we must assume had joined the first at the junction of the trail that led to Portland and the Willamette, we hear no more until some of its members at least, were at the Ahtanum Mission.

William Mitchell, a member of the same section as Milton Woodin leaves a written record which states, "At Fort Walla Walla (Wallula) our train divided part going down the Columbia River, while the rest of us went on north and through the "Natchez" pass in the Cascade Mountains. When we arrived at the foot of the mountains, we sent two men forward to see if we could get over and they returned, reporting too much snow for the wagons, so it was decided to leave our outfits at the Catholic Mission that was there, and proceed on foot, letting the women ride whatever there was to ride."

Through members of Milton Woodin's family, it is definitely known that the mission mentioned was Ahtanum Mission, located in the Ahtanum Valley. Records show that Father Pandosy was there in 1853. It was to one side of the route taken by James Longmire as he traveled up the Moxee, through Pleasant Valley to the Wenas Valley, some fifteen to twenty miles. This fact would indicate that the two sections were again traveling separately.

There is no date mentioned in the Mitchell account, which makes it impossible to compare the time the Woodin-Mitchell party was at the Ahtanum Mission, with that in which the James Longmire party passed through Selah. But the mention of snow in Mitchell's report and none whatever in Longmire's suggests that there was a difference in time.

Mitchell further recites, "Mr. Woodin and myself were the first to start over the pass and we found the way not nearly as bad as had been represented, and by taking advantage of cutoffs, we made very good progress and without mis-adventure until the last night in the mountains we became separated. Mr. Woodin took what he thought to be a cut-off while I waited on the trail and at night, as he did not rejoin me, I called him but received no answer.

"So I went to sleep at the foot of a tree and the next morning when I awoke I found that I had rolled several feet down the mountain from where I went to sleep and it was raining hard, so

after stretching a piece of canvas over some brush to keep the rain off, I built a fire and was cooking the last of my store of rice when Mr. Woodin came into my camp. We ate the rice that I had prepared and started on our way again. That afternoon we met a Mr. Connell who gave us a little flour which we cooked on the end of sticks and ate.

"Mr. Connell was a very good friend to the emigrants and often helped them with provisions, as he had a cabin on the west side of the mountains on what is now Connell's Prairie. He was killed by the Indians in the uprising of 1855-56. We took supper at his home and then, after hiring some horses from friendly Indians, pushed on to Fort Steilacoom. I remained there but a short time and went on in a canoe with a Mr. Skidmore the next day to Olympia, arriving there October 6."

Another account of the Cascade crossing is written by Bennett Johns of the Tennessee party, who had joined the Mitchell Woodin contingents to make what became known as the second section of the Longmire Train. (He is also mentioned by Longmire as being in the first section, again indicating that emigrants moved back and forth between the two sections.)

Mr. Johns says, "Owing to delays from sickness, and fatigue of the cattle, when snow began to fall it became necessary to abandon the wagons and much of the outfit."

Since the first section did not abandon their wagons, it must be assumed that Mr. Johns was again with the section of the train who did. Continuing his account, Mr. Johns states, "Food became so scarce that Milton Woodin and William Mitchell were -sent on ahead of the weary emigrants with a -prayer for assistance, to the settlers of Seattle. With characteristic western generosity the appeal was responded to and food sent back along the trail to relieve the distress of the starving emigrants.

Mitchell makes no further mention of Milton Woodin after leaving Connell's cabin to "push on to Fort Steilacoom", but does tell of traveling with another man to Olympia. So it must have been Milton Woodin, alone, who returned with food and help for his party. The help could easily have been Milton Burge's father, A.J., who is known to have brought food to the Longmires.

From Mitchell's own account, he reached Fort Steilacoom October 4. On that date the Longmire party was either perilously negotiating the precipitous cliff, previously mentioned, or traveling somewhere between there and the Nisqually Plains, and Woodin's party was somewhere in the Cascades—possibly with the Longmires, but maybe elsewhere.

The exact truth will probably never be known. Written records are sketchy at best and living sources have long since embarked on a longer journey, into a greater unknown.

While it is pure speculation and is advanced only as such, an interesting guess is that the Woodin-Mitchell-Jones section might have followed the Yakima River up through the lower valley into Union Gap, then learning of the Ahtanum Mission, went there. They were desperately in need of food and many were ill. It was a direct route and near water all of the way, while that followed by the first section not only zig-zagged, forded the river several unnecessary times and then followed a round-about route through a waterless region.

After leaving the Ahtanum Mission, it seems reasonable that the Woodin party would most naturally continue up the Naches River from its mouth. The first contingent wandered back to the Naches at Nile Creek, after crossing over a divide from the Wenas. From Nile Creek on, whether traveling together or not, it was necessarily the same trail.

The known facts are that there were two sections of the Longmire train. There were thirty-six wagons and 146 to 153 people in the first section; about twenty wagons and forty-odd people in the Woodin.Mitchell-Johns, second section; and that they crossed the Missouri River twenty-two days apart. They were evidently together at Wallula and at numerous- times, sufficiently close to each other while crossing the plains, to visit back and forth.

A monument marks the fact that the Longmire first section traveled through the Moxee and Wenas. It is equally well known that the Woodin party was in the Ahtanum, and that both sections crossed the Naches pass. Whether they were together at any time between Wallula and Fort Steilacoom, the destination of both, or not, is pure conjecture. Both arrived during October 1953, worn, ragged and half-starved.

Many had left treasured possessions along the route that had exacted all but life itself. The Woodin party, having left their wagons at Ahtanum, traded what horses they managed to bring thus far, for canoes at the headwaters of the White River to travel down the White and the Duwamish, and settled along the coast at points of convenience, liking, and ability to secure land.

Milton Woodin, after a short stay at Fort Steilacoom, found something to his liking in Seattle and settled there.

Ira, his son, who had left the Naches-Pass-bound train at Wallula, for the Willamette Valley, and who while there, had helped drive a herd of cattle into California, joined his father in Seattle in 1854. A year had passed since father and son had separated at Wallula, each to experience widely different sights and adventures.

Thrills of the reunion can be pictured as details of their separate experiences were exchanged and plans made for their Seattle future together.