

## NACHES PASS TRAIL CASE Account.

Robert Ormond Case and Victoria Case, "The Longmire-Byles Wagon Train at Naches Pass," Last Mountains, the story of the Cascades. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1945, p. 56-60.

Slowly the Cascades yielded to the onslaughts from the east. In 1853 the range was scaled at a second point, known as Naches Pass, north of Mount Rainier and some hundred miles north of the Columbia gorge.

This daring and near-tragic exploit was significant of the gambling caliber of the emigrants, demonstrated many times. They knew well enough, by now, that the mountains were not to be trifled with. Yet, as demonstrated in the blazing of the Barlow Trail, they were willing to risk their lives and the lives of their women and children on a new and untried route, confident that they would somehow make it through.

Community pride was partly to blame for the Naches affair. Settlers in the Puget Sound area had noted the tremendous flow of emigrants through the Columbia gorge, and the consequent rapid settlement of the Willamette Valley. Why not divert some of this flow over a northern route, and thus bring about a swifter development of the Sound country?

Citizens of Olympia accordingly banded together to hew a road up to the timbered summit from the western side. Without waiting for the completion of this road, they dispatched a youth named Sargent to intercept a large wagon train known to be on the way and lead it northward for the attempted crossing. The theory was that the attackers from east and west would meet- at the summit before snow fell.

Sargent readily agreed, notwithstanding the fact that members of his own family, his father and brothers, were in the coming train, and he had no personal knowledge of the terrain east of the pass. It had merely been "reported" that mounted Indians and a few pack trains had crossed that way.

The oncoming train as readily agreed to follow young Sargent, confident that he knew whereof he spoke. Some doubts arose when they stood in the shadow of Mount Rainier, the continent's most massive peak, and saw the remote' feathery crest north of the dome, the "low point" which must be scaled. These doubts strengthened when they ascended the wrong canyon for several miles and had to return again, losing many days.

When they finally approached the summit the season was far advanced. It was too late then to turn back.

After frightful difficulties which in many ways duplicated the Barlow Trail assault, they reached the summit prairie—actually the bleak ridge above timber line—and found it empty and lifeless. No sound of axes rang in the forests that descended in stupendous steps westward; only the sustained sighing of the wind in the timber and the muted roar of hidden cataracts.

It developed later that the Olympia enthusiasts had tired of their task less than a week before. Conveniently assuming that no train was coming this season, they had packed up and gone home.

No assumption faced the wagon train; it was brutal fact. They had to descend before snow blanketed the Cascades. There was no choice but to descend westward. They had come too far to retreat to the plateau. Winter would come first on the eastward side.

The train crept down over terrain that grew ever more steep and treacherous, and suddenly came to a literal jump off. It was a vertical cliff some thirty feet high. At its bottom was a slope so close to the perpendicular that only a few scattered trees were rooted precariously on its thousand foot face. At first glance it seemed to be an impassable barrier. Both the oxen and wagons must be lowered with ropes down the cliff, and also down the slope. But with what ropes?

They hit upon a desperate expedient, one that further impaired their thin chances of survival.' They killed their poorest and weakest oxen, skinned them, cut the green hides into strips, and fashioned crude ropes deemed sufficiently strong for the purpose. The oxen and wagons were lowered over the cliff one by one, while the anxious company watched. One wagon broke loose and went rolling and catapulting to destruction in the gorge. But the bulk of the train made it safely down.

In the savage terrain below, further attempts to reach the settlements seemed vain. Still they fought on. They came upon a pack trail, but it was too narrow for the wagons. A road had to be hewed through the timber step by step. Great logs lay across the path; they leaned smaller logs against the giants, bridged them with poles, and crept laboriously forward- They knew it was hopeless. Their food had given out. Winter was overhauling them from the heights. Sanctuary was still far below.

Then came an incident which outranks fiction. A youth from Olympia had come out with a pack train of food for the road builders. He found the camp deserted; the road builders had gone home. Leaving the food in the empty camp he rode up the pack trail out of sheer curiosity, to "have a look at the mountains"; and thus came face to face with two emaciated white women, coming slowly down the path.

Discouraged, they had walked ahead of the party, away from the wailing children and beaten men, to "have good cry."

That slender thread bridged the gap between the party and survival. The youth brought up his food, which gave new heart and hope to the battlers of the line, then galloped back to the settlements for help. On the way he posted signs to encourage the emigrants: "This stretch is a shade better..... This stretch worse," and finally, "This is the worst."

The rest of it was a dreary, slogging, but successful race with the winter, which followed them down like whitened wolves from the heights. The road makers came up from Olympia and helped the train through. The wagons crossed the Greenwater River sixteen times during the descent, the White six times. Following a final haul over a swirling ridge known as Wind Mountain, they came at last to the sea-level and sanctuary.

There might be rain and fog here during the "winter months," even an occasional blanket of transient snow. But the drifts and blizzards and sub zero winds sweeping the Great Plains-all that "winter" truly meant to unprotected wagons east of the Cascades-now lay beyond the sheltering barrier.