

**CHILD OF THE OREGON TRAIL:**  
**MEMOIRS OF PUYALLUP'S**  
**CHARLES HENRY ROSS,**  
**1851-1948**  
 By Charlie Ross  
 Jeannie L. Knudson, Compiler  
 Puyallup, Wash.: Puyallup Historical  
 Society, 2018  
 326 pages, illustrations, index  
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*Reviewed by Roger Blair*

*Child of the Oregon Trail* is an autobiographical history of a long-lived Puyallup (Washington) Valley pioneer and stories about the growth and settlement of Puyallup, Tacoma, and the surrounding area as he experienced it. A great grandniece of Charles Henry Ross discovered Charlie Ross's papers in the Washington State Historical Society. Among the documents was a fully completed manuscript, *Child of the Trail*; "Oregon" is not included in the title of Ross's original manuscript. Ross wrote the document over a ten-year period, finishing at age 96. He died in 1948, shortly after its completion.

Recognizing the importance of her find, the great-grandniece, Jeannie L. Knutson, "compiled" the manuscript. Knutson provided only very light editing, which for the most part consisted of bracketing dates of birth and death after the mention of every name. The date bracketing became annoying when the same names were bracketed multiple times and persons not pertinent to the story were also bracketed. There are also several places that warranted footnote explanations, but there is not a single footnote. In a few cases, brief editorial explanatory information was given in the same bracketed manner. Even then, the documentation was somewhat inconsistent. For instance, in the first half of the book there are several references to Mt. Tacoma. It wasn't until the last

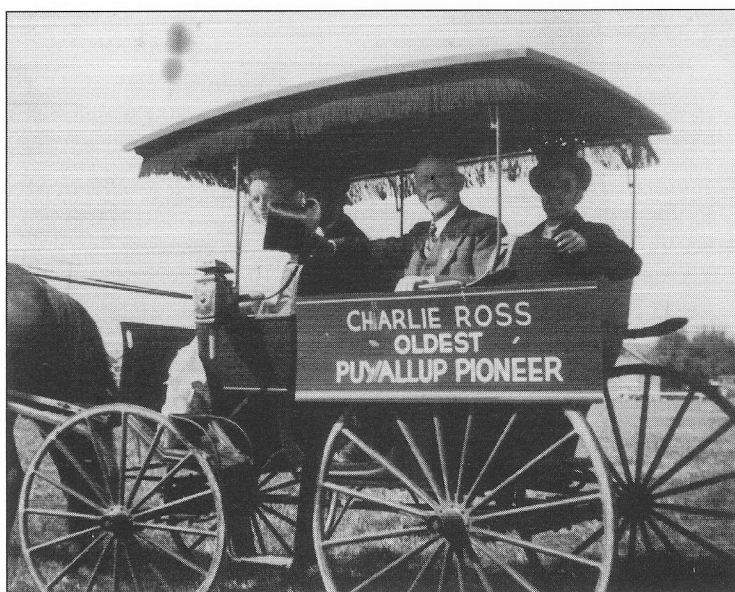
half that Mt. Tacoma is finally identified as "[Mt. Rainier]."

The book's title came from Ross himself. He literally was a child of the Oregon Trail. He was born September 3, 1851, on the trail at Lee's Encampment, today's Meacham, Oregon. Frequently, Ross recalled, throughout his childhood, he was recognized as "the child of the trail."

I don't read much fiction, and quotation marks are a red flag to me to study the content carefully when evaluating a book with a historic theme. This book is filled with quotation marks, reflecting Ross's recollection of stories and conversations he heard throughout his life. It reads like fiction, but this book is not fictional history. The author heard the conversations and stories that he describes, directly from family, friends, and others, and personally experienced some of the events he describes in this book.

Much of the story revolves around growing up and living in the Puyallup Valley, although Ross describes numerous homesites and events in Oregon and Washington, before his family finally settled around Puyallup, Washington, near Tacoma. This book is as much a history narrative of the Puyallup Valley as an autobiography, probably more so. Also, it is not just a story of overland trail experiences, as the title might imply. Readers seeking to read about the trail will be disappointed. Born

Charlie Ross, probably  
 in a 1940s Meeker  
 Days Festival parade.  
 COURTESY SOUTHERN  
 UTAH UNIVERSITY,  
 SHERRATT LIBRARY,  
 MS120B39F0049.




near the end of his parents' overland trek, he could not possibly recall any time on the trail. In fact, he didn't even visit the site of his birth until 1923, when he attended an Oregon Trail pageant attended by President Warren G. Harding, celebrating the 80th anniversary of the first wagons to cross the Blue Mountains and completion of the first transcontinental highway to the Northwest. Sitting on the speakers' platform with the president, Ross reported he was within 800 feet of the spot where he was born in a covered wagon.

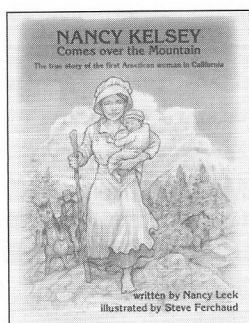
Ross's treatment of the trail, rather, is a generalized history of the pioneers' trek, some of which occurred beyond his birth year, a compilation of others' experiences. For instance, in recreating one of the "conversational

stories," Ross writes that his mother said, "we never had a single case of cholera that was raging along the trail." Cholera did rage along the trail, but not until in 1852, a year after his parents completed the trip.

He discusses the numerous moves the family made, making a living off the land. There are stories describing how pioneers cleared mammoth stumps, the Indian War of 1855–56, the coming of the Northern Pacific Railroad, firsthand accounts about early pioneer families and events in their lives, hops culture, the fruit industry, an invasion of Puyallup by a would-be unit of Coxey's army, the growth of Puyallup, Tacoma, and surrounding towns, and many other topics of early Northwest settlement, especially in and around Puyallup.

Charlie Ross was a farmer, sold real estate, taught at the first school in Tacoma, served on the nascent Washington Horticultural Board, and represented Washington at the Pan-American Exposition (the Buffalo, New York, World's Fair) in 1901, and a respected citizen. He knew Ezra Meeker, indeed worked in his store, and included several stories involving Meeker.

The book is an interesting read and I recommend it, if you are interested in stories concerning settlement of the Puyallup Valley, routine activities of pioneer settlers, and relations with local Indians. If you seek to learn anything new about the Oregon Trail, you will be disappointed. 



"High in the Sierra Nevada, Nancy Kelsey sat on her horse, holding her little girl, Martha Ann. She was afraid to dismount her horse. . . . The men had gone on ahead to scout the trail, leaving her alone. They would come back for her, but for now there was nothing to do but wait."

So begins this charming children's book about Nancy Kelsey, the first American woman to cross the Sierra Nevada into California in 1841 with the Bidwell-Bartleson Party. She was seventeen years old, pregnant, and mother of a young baby when she followed her restless husband, Benjamin, overland from Missouri to California.

Drawing on Nancy Kelsey's later recollections, the story describes her and Ben riding horses alongside their oxen-drawn wagon and crossing a river with the help of local Indians who, with "rawhide boats made of buffalo skins," helped the emigrants cross safely. During a bad storm, they braced themselves against their wagon to prevent it from blowing over in the high winds, and at Independence Rock, she asked John Bidwell to write her name on the rock with black axle grease.

When some in the party decided to head for Oregon, Ben and Nancy stayed with the group bound for California, making her the only woman in the party of 32 men.

Despite hardships and abandoning their wagons, they reached the rugged Sierra

Nevada and became the first overland party to cross those mountains on foot (the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party would be the first to cross the Sierra with their wagons in 1844).

On Christmas Day 1841, Ben and Nancy arrived at Sutter's Fort, but their adventures didn't stop there. Several years later, Ben joined the Bear Flag Revolt, and Nancy helped sew the flag for the short-lived Bear Flag Republic. While the storyline ends at this point, the Kelsey story does not, and Nancy Leek thoughtfully summarizes Ben and Nancy's lives after the Bear Flag Revolt.

Author Nancy Leek has done a wonderful job of presenting Nancy Kelsey's story to a younger audience, using an intelligent prose that does not oversimplify the story of this remarkable lady. Copiously illustrated by Steve Ferchaud, his colorful renditions of Nancy Kelsey's adventures beautifully frame the book's narrative. Together, this creates an engaging approach to help spark a life-long appreciation for trails history in younger minds. I would have enjoyed a map showing the route and important points along the way, but this omission does not detract from the overall quality of the book.

Thoroughly researched, the narrative of the book provides a balanced view of the simple pleasures and harsh realities emigrants faced along the trail. Kelsey's own words about her

NANCY KELSEY COMES OVER  
THE MOUNTAIN:  
THE TRUE STORY OF THE  
FIRST AMERICAN WOMAN  
IN CALIFORNIA  
by Nancy Leek

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