

# The adventurers of my pioneer ancestors

*By Roy Stilson Kirkham*



*Evening on the Oregon Trail*

## Forward

This is the story of my ancestors who launched out on the Oregon Trail in the wagon trains of 1843, 1845 and 1846. Their destination was Clatsop Plains in the Oregon territory. The Lewis and Clark Corps of Discovery had made their trek to this same destination, and wintered-over here, 37 years earlier.

Historical events dramatically impact the family following the United States acquisition of the California Territory and the discovery of gold near Sutter's Fort.

The story of my pioneer ancestors would continue with their relocation to the Willamette Valley and then, my branch of the family tree, to Cow Creek in Douglas County.

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### **The chronological order of their departure on the Oregon Trail and some background on trail adventure and the cast of characters:**

**First to make the journey:** Jeremiah Gerome (Jerry) Tuller was in the Applegate Train which started in 1843. I believe that it was Jerry who wrote to the Robinson family group and interested them in the Clatsop Plains area of the Oregon Territory. Later in my story you will see that Jerry married into the Robinson family and became my step great great grandfather.

When the Applegate Train reached The Dalles they rafted down the rapids on the Columbia River. One of their rafts capsized in the current and Jessie Applegate's 9 year old son, Edward, Lindsey Applegate's 9 year old son, Warren, and 70 year old

“Uncle Mac” of the extended family, were drowned. This tragedy made the Applegate brothers determined to find a safer wagon train route to the Oregon Territory. This decision had a direct impact on the Captain John Robinson wagon company which made their Oregon Trail adventure in 1846.

**Second to make the journey:** 18 year old Miriam A. Robinson married Arthur H. (A.H.) Thompson in April 1844 and, less than a year later, in March 1845 they set out from near Hennepin, Putnam County, Illinois toward the starting point of the Oregon Trail migration. Arthur was an adventuresome dreamer, which Miriam loved and admired. Miriam, herself, was filled with the spirit of adventure and desired to see new things. Arthur was going to see to it that the British would not get control of the Oregon Territory. Miriam and Arthur were my great great grandparents. The Thompson's started their adventure in the company of their friends Mr. And Mrs. Eugene Skinner, whose destination was the lower end of the Willamette Valley. In the years to come a city and a butte would be named after them.

**Third to make the journey:** Captain John Robinson and his wife Margaret (Peggy) Carnahan Wilson, my great great great grandparents, started out on the Oregon Trail in 1846 along with their daughter Elizabeth Robinson, her husband Obediah Motley and the Motley children. In his younger years John Robinson became adept at frontier work and was soon recognized as a scout. He was sent to the Illinois Territory to assist and protect the settlers. John was appointed captain in the Illinois Volunteers during the Black Hawk War and kept the title of Captain from then on. Obediah C. Motley had apprenticed in the United States Navy and became an accomplished navigator. When Obediah left the Navy he bought a boat and proceeded up the Mississippi River. When he reached Illinois he sold the boat, settled there, met and married Elizabeth Robinson. Elizabeth and Obediah are my great great great aunt and uncle.



*Captain John Robinson*

## **Stories of the overland journey**

**The Thompson journey:** On May 11, 1845 they started on the trail in the company of 480 wagons, nearly all of them pulled by ox teams, and large bands of cattle. Making very little headway everyone agreed to divide. The wagon trains kept on dividing until they were in a company of five to twenty wagons which they found much more convenient.

Fifty years later, Miriam (Robinson-Thompson) Tuller had her recollections of the journey published in the Oregon Trail Transactions Number 23. Even after 50 years you could hear the excitement of the adventure in her words:

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“We traveled up Platte River and forded it. Then we went in the buffalo country; there were solid masses of these as far as the eye could reach, and we had fresh meat galore. The little, graceful antelopes were plenty and now and then we saw a big horn and an elk.

“We stopped one day at Fort Laramie. From Platte we journeyed to Sweetwater, then to Green River, which we forded by placing blocks under the wagon bed to raise it up to keep things inside dry. We camped one day near Fort Bridger, then on to Fort Hall. Captain Grant, of the Hudson's Bay Company, was in charge; he gave us the consoling information that the Indians would kill us before we got to Oregon; but they proved better than represented. We had little trouble with Indians, but they stole some things. We saw thousands of them, many in the same style as Adam and Eve when first in the Garden of Eden.



“Next went to Fort Boise; Mr. Craig, of the Hudson's Bay Company, was in charge. He was more polite than Captain Grant; he only said we had better wait for more company, and he sent a French servant with a large canoe to take us women across Snake River, where we crossed it the second time. The men and teams forded it; then Bear River, Burnt River, Malheur and Powder Rivers, with their numerous Indian camps, were passed; the beautiful Blue Mountains, Grand Ronde Valley and river, then John Day's River and next DesChutes or Fall River. This we had to ferry, the first since leaving the Missouri. There was a sand storm raging; some Indians were there with their canoes who were more than willing to take us over for some calico shirts. The wagons were unloaded and taken apart and after many loads, we were safely over. The teams had to swim.



*The Trail as it is today*

“Then we went to The Dalles; here Father Waller and another missionary were stationed, who sold us some beef and potatoes, for provisions were getting low. There were a few row boats at The Dalles to take the emigrants down the Columbia and up the Willamette, as that was the only way to reach the Willamette Valley with wagons at that time. There were so many of us, although one-third of our number had turned off at Fort Hall to go to California under Wm. B. Ide, guided by the old trapper Greenwood. It would take too long for all to go in those small boats, so some concluded to go through the Cascade Mountains. S.K. Barlow was the moving spirit in this undertaking.

“There was only an Indian trail that some stock had been driven over. We started with teams and wagons. We had overcome so many difficulties that we felt quite sure we could go almost anywhere. We got along quite well until we came to the heavy timber. The men worked on the road for about two weeks, but gave up hope of getting the wagons through that fall, as it was now October, and concluded it was best to send the women and children out of the mountains. I was mounted on a Cayuse pony and in company with Mr. and Mrs Buffum and Captain Palmer, left husband and camp - everything - but a few clothes and a little provisions, to try to reach some place before the rain set in.

“The first night after we left camp rain commenced and it rained all the time until we got through the mountains. The trail that we traveled went up over the south side of Mt. Hood, away up to and over perpetual snow. The coming down was worse, the zigzag trail a foot or more deep with sand. We camped on the side of the mountain as night overtook us. There it rained very hard all night. We had no tent or shelter of any kind. The fourth night we met three men from Oregon City, coming to meet those emigrants in the mountains, with some provisions, as they had heard we were in distress. We were not in any immediate danger of starving but the beef and sugar were very acceptable, and to be so kindly thought of by strangers was very cheering. The names of those men were Mathew Gilmore, Peter G. Stewart and Charles Gilmore. The provisions were contributed by the people around Oregon City.

“There were many many fallen trees across the trail that the horses had to jump. The streams were deep, swift and cold. We reached Oregon City the sixth day from camp, but when I saw a woman on a very poor horse with a little child in her lap and one strapped on behind her and two or three tied on another horse, I felt very very thankful and imagined I was only having a picnic.

“I found a pleasant place to stop and was very kindly treated by Mr. and Mrs. Holmes, near Oregon City. I remained there through February, then went to Yamhill County where we stayed through the summer. In June my husband, and others who had left their wagons in the mountains, took their teams and returned to bring them out, as the road had been cleared of timber. The mice had made lint of most of my clothing and bedding, but I was glad to get what was left, as things of that kind were very scarce in Oregon at that time.

“In the fall of 1846 my parents came, and we all went down the Columbia River to Clatsop Plains”

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Where the wagons spent the winter on the south slope of Mt. Hood was named “Fort Deposit” and a small cabin was built to shelter the watchman. The trail the pioneers blazed became the Barlow Road.

In June of 1846 Jessie Marion Thompson was born in Yamhill County and baby Jessie made the trip down the Columbia River, with the rest of the family, on the last leg of the Oregon Trail to Clatsop Plains. Jessie was my great grandmother.

**The Robinson and Motley journey:** On May 7, 1846, the pioneers “set sail” on their journey from independence toward the Oregon country. In four days it was decided to divide the train into two companies. The pilot for both companies was Orus Brown, William Keithly captain of the first and John Robinson was elected captain of the new company. Pioneer Virgil Pringle was in the wagon train and kept a diary of the journey, upon which this report is based:

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Within six days they were seeing many Indians. On May 17<sup>th</sup> the groups camped by a Caw Village and Indians attempted to steal some of the stock.

The pioneer trail journals tell of fording rivers, members detained by illness catching up

with the train and violent prairie storms turning creeks into rivers, There were times that illness would detain the majority of the train and those in the lead would start out by mistake. Down the trail the “break aways” would be found waiting for the main party to catch up with them.

Babies were being born and a family has a young daughter die. She is buried the next morning, in as decent a manner as possible, and the train starts out, again. It is difficult to imagine the anguish a family must experience as they leave the grave of a child, alone on an empty prairie.

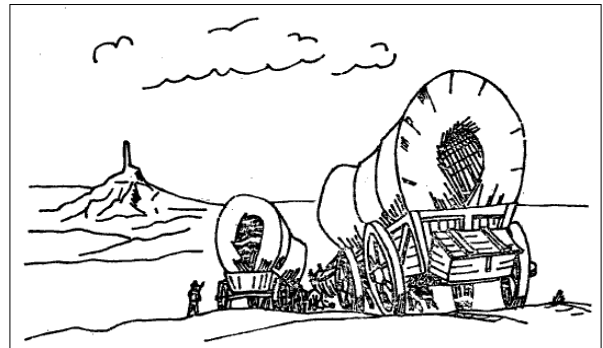
There are signs of buffalo and prairie dog towns, then by June 9<sup>th</sup> there are “buffalo plenty” with two being shot and killed. Without trees for fire wood buffalo chips are burned for fuel.

On June 11<sup>th</sup> they came across a train of 33 wagons that had been stopped for a week rounding up stray cattle. Occasionally storms would overwhelm the train, everything would be soaked and they went to sleep in wet bedding. The next day the train would lay over and other wagons would catch up to them as they were drying things out and checking the condition of their provisions.



On June 13<sup>th</sup> the pioneers came upon a deserted cabin called Ash Grove Hotel, near a fine spring at the mouth of Ash Creek. Inside the Hotel the pioneers discovered the cards of all the companies that had preceded them. Reading the cards provided quite a treat, and a card was left by them for those who followed to read and enjoy.

Passed Parker's Castle the Chimney and Scott's Bluffs moving on to Fort Laramie. There, on June 22<sup>nd</sup>, the pioneers found 200 lodges of Sioux. The next day the pioneers gave their “Sioux Brethren” a feast, which pleased the Sioux very much. The Pipe of Peace was smoked and the Sioux were given gifts of powder, lead and tobacco. Although this was not entered in the diary, the feast and gifts were most likely given to obtain the right to pass through Sioux country. Within two days the wagon trains enter the Black Hills.



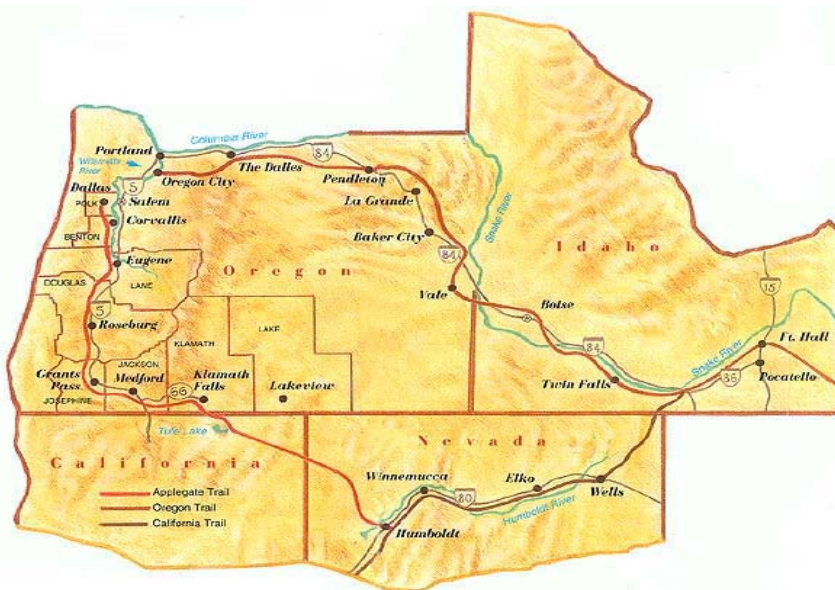
July 4<sup>th</sup> the train encamped near Independence Rock. They find they are now in a high region and there is frost in the morning. July 12<sup>th</sup> a baby girl is born and the train lays over for the day.

The journal now gives short reports of weather, trail conditions, geographic locations and Fort Bridger is reached on July 22<sup>nd</sup> where the important find was plenty of grass for the stock. On July 28<sup>th</sup> the pioneers passed a Shoshone village of about 600 Indians. On August 2<sup>nd</sup> the train made only 2 ½ miles, reaching Soda Springs and reporting on the “many and interesting novelties of the place”. The next day the train makes only 3 ½ miles and a 6 year old boy falls out of his wagon and is killed when the wheels roll over him. The rest of the day is spent burying the boy.

On August 7<sup>th</sup> they pass Fort Hall, heading for the fork of the California and Oregon Trails. On August 9<sup>th</sup> they meet Jessie Applegate who has come from the Oregon country and

has scouted out a new route to Oregon. Jessie is very enthusiastic about the new trail and convinces many pioneers to proceed that way.

Jessie mentions that some road work is needed and this is a major understatement. Many of the pioneers never forgave Applegate for leading them on. Without realizing it, the wagon companies had agreed to make the new southern route passable for the others who would follow later. The southern route had only been marked and the first wagon company to travel it was going to make the road.



When reaching the California-Oregon Trail fork, the pioneers followed the California Trail for about 300 miles to the fork of the new route to Oregon. The rest of the Southern Route (Applegate Trail) survey crew were waiting there for Jessie Applegate to return when a train of over 100 wagons appeared. The surveyors were amazed that so many would be willing to improve on, and construct the Southern Route. It became apparent to the surveyors that the pioneers were unaware of the task which was ahead of them.

Starting on September 6<sup>th</sup> the new Applegate route soon proves to be very challenging. Immediately they were in a desert (Black Rock Desert) with only a few weak springs. Some stock are too weak to continue and are left on the side of the road. There was heavy road pulling and bad water.

On September 12<sup>th</sup> the trains go down a steep incline into a canyon. There they come to a beautiful grassy canyon with plenty of springs and get to recover from the desert. The road goes from bad to good then tolerable and pulling is heavy at times. Cattle are found shot with arrows and a few die. Two days later the mountains recede and a grassy flat opens to them. This provides a good camp and the teams can recuperate. The weather is getting cool and it looks like there could be snow.

September 20<sup>th</sup> the wagons cross over a mountain and the ascent was very steep. On the other side was a beautiful plain with lofty pine and cedar trees. In a week the train was among several lakes, Klamath Lake being the largest. On September 29<sup>th</sup> They overtook the wagon train ahead, making their company 50 wagons strong. This did not deter the Indians who made off with many cattle during the night. All but ten were recovered the following day.

The wagons rolled on to Goose Lake and Tule Lake and crossed Lost River on a natural stone bridge. Traveled along the shore of (Lower) Klamath Lake heading towards Greensprings (in the lower eastern corner of present day Jackson County, Oregon). The journal makes many mentions of bad or intolerable road, and days lost improving the road. Periodically time is lost when they encounter unmarked trail.

October 18<sup>th</sup> Martha Crowley, 14 years of age, dies. The train is able to move one mile and make camp. The morning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Martha Crowley is buried. Today, a creek running by

the grave is named Grave Creek in memory of Martha.

The wet season has started, provisions are running out, breakdowns and a “great loss of property” and this continues into November. Weakness is overcoming the pioneers and their teams. A man goes 40 miles ahead, over the Callipoa Mountains for provisions. By November 8<sup>th</sup> they are across the Umpqua River. Indians provide them with some venison and a few miles after, the man arrives back from over the Callipoa Mountains with provisions. There is much joy in the camp that night.

On November 10<sup>th</sup> they cross Elk Creek and find “first rate” feed for the teams and cattle. The train lays over here for three days in order to make repairs, rest the teams and lay in a stock of deer meat and salmon that they acquired from the Indians. Mrs. J.B. Bounds dies on the evening of the 13<sup>th</sup>. On November 14<sup>th</sup>, after traveling six miles, the train makes camp and bury Mrs. Bonds, so close to the journeys end. Death and lonely graves are becoming a routine.

Now the wagons are arriving at the foot of the Callipoa Mountains. It is raining and the road building struggle continues in muddy conditions, double teaming for steep uphill grades, finding little grass and some cattle start dying.

On November 22<sup>nd</sup> they finish the road building and come out of a mountain pass into the Willamette Valley. Three days later they are camped beside the Willamette River and amazed with the “handsomest valley ever beheld”.

The Robinson and Motley families continue on the trail to its end in Polk County. Then on to Yamhill County and, in the fall of 1846, meet with the Thompson's and baby Jessie. Arthur Thompson has retrieved their wagons from Fort Deposit, on the south slope of Mt. Hood, and shortly afterward the three families go down the Willamette and Columbia rivers by boat, their destination being Clatsop Plains.

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