Chapter One
Absalom Smiths

"Mount Hood, lonely in its grandeur, towered far up into the sky, and seemed like a sentinel guarding the portals of the western paradise."*

*Chronicler John R. McBride[1]

The promise of free land was a perfectly reasonable explanation for why they had undertaken the 2000-mile journey to Oregon. Why else would anyone "pick up stakes" and move themselves and their whole families clear across half a continent, far away from their friends and relatives; travel across a wild and uncharted wilderness; brave hostile inhabitants and a variety of other unknown dangers; plus subject themselves and their families to a host of potential hardships and privations; if it hadn't been for the promise of free land?

Why indeed! But the more I delved into this unusual story, and the better I came to know and appreciate the circumstances of my ancestors and those who had traveled alongside them on these perilous cross-country journeys, the more I began to question that the lure of free land was the real reason why they had gone west. After all, a large number of these early Oregon Trail emigrants were well-established farmers in their early to mid-forties – my own three ancestor families among them -- who owned their farms outright, and whose families had been farming their land for many years. In many cases, these farmer families had accumulated so much equipment that it took several covered wagons just to transport their belongings across half a continent. Some emigrants even had whole herds of livestock that had to be driven, tended, and safeguarded along every mile of the trail. Plus in those days these emigrants typically had very large families to look after – many of their children being mere toddlers – some of them babes in arms, several even born along the trail.

Given all of these circumstances even the most prudent observer would likely conclude that completely uprooting one's entire family and embarking on an perilous cross-country wagon journey was a high-risk venture fraught with potential dangers, to say the least. So why had they done it?

Many years later trail chronicler John R. McBride had reflected that "in looking back to that long journey and striving to find what could have been the motive which influenced people at that date to brave such perils, dangers, and hardships, I can find immigrants from across the continent none that seems adequate to account for it. The emigration and settlement of Oregon by American pioneers will ever remain to human reason the most mysterious, unreasonable and reckless movement that has occurred in our national history. Behind it must

have been a blind instinct or impulse, not realized by those who were affected by it; or a providence which uses all men for its purposes and sends them to do its will, as it sends the stars in their circuits and causes the rivers to run to the sea."

McBride may have been right: "providence" may very well have played a large part in it. But there were also a host of other perfectly plausible and eminently more practical explanations put forth, such as finding a more hospitable climate, improving the health of an ailing family member, recouping fallen family fortunes, or getting an entirely new start in life. Then too there was the lure of enticements offered by those who had been there, and who had returned to paint glowing accounts of a better life in the land of perpetual milk and honey.

Yet as reasonable and applicable as some of these explanations may have been in certain situations, I eventually came to realize that none of these superficial reasons really got to what seemed to be the real heart of the matter -- and this was that these cross-country emigrants may have embarked upon the Oregon Trail for no better reason than *the pure spirit of adventure!*

And if the "spirit of adventure" was indeed the real reason most of these emigrants chose to become part of this great western migration, in looking back at what many had experienced during those early years of trail expansion, one would have to conclude that they got a whole lot more "adventure" than they had bargained for!

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McBRIDE: From Fort Laramie we began to touch the flanks of the Rocky Mountains. Laramie Peak, about 30 miles west of the fort was a lofty mountain of the Black Hills range, and we soon entered their recesses. ... We reached the crossing of the North Platte. The warm weather had melted the snows at its source, and we found that fording was impossible. We cut trees and built rafts on which to transport our train. This occupied some three days, when we found ourselves on the northerly side of the turbulent river, without having incurred any accident in all the dangerous work. We built two rafts of logs, each 30 feet long, pinned together with two inch pins penetrating cross ties first, and then the logs; then the whole was joined together with log chains and an oar was hung at each corner and a steering oar at the stern of the raft.

Thus wrote trail chronicler **John R. McBride** in recalling many years later what he had experienced as a thirteen-year-old boy in the early days of the Oregon Trail. In leaving Ft. Laramie in today's eastern Wyoming and approaching the Continental Divide, young McBride was driving one of two wagons of his parents' large family on their 1846 journey across half a continent, all the way from St. Joseph, Missouri, to Oregon's Willamette Valley. Most wagon drivers were at least sixteen years of age before they had fully developed the strength and dexterity needed to drive and control six to eight oxen pulling an unstable loaded wagon over some very rough terrain. But this not yet fourteen-

year-old boy was the only other one eligible for this duty in his otherwise all-girl family of nine children ages three to fifteen, and father James McBride had apparently decided against hiring an outside young man to drive the second family wagon, as was common in those early times on the trail.

Chronicler McBride's father, forty-four-year-old James McBride, was a learned man -- both a preacher and a medical doctor. He and his wife Mahala Miller, thirty-three, were traveling with the families of her sister, and those of the Burnett brothers -- Glen Owen & George William, ages thirty-six and thirty-four -- younger brothers of Peter Burnett, a leader of the first large trail migration in 1843 and a future governor of California. The common bond of the four families was their membership in the Christian religious denomination, of which both James McBride and Glen Owen Burnett were preachers.

Early on, this McBride party had attached itself of a larger company of twenty-two wagons under the command of a capable young "acting" captain, **Ben Simpson,** only twenty-eight, the oldest son of fifty-three-year-old William Simpson and his wife, Mary "Polly" Kimsey, forty-nine. The Simpsons were traveling to Oregon with the families of all but one of their large group of nine married children, plus their three yet unmarried younger children; as well as the many families of a large number of aunt Polly's Kimsey nieces and nephews.

Aunt Polly's grandson John Thomas Simpson told an amusing story about what occurred during and encampment back on the Nebraska plains near an Indian village. His grandmother had been "sitting in her wagon lighting her pipe, when one of the Indians spied her ... and several Indians came to the front of the wagon, and one of them asked for a match." Aunt Polly "gave him one ... and another Indian took his place and also wanted one, but she told him she had no more to spare ... when he made a move to climb into the wagon and help himself … grandmother reached above her head and took from where it was hung a dragoon pistol, and pointed it at him. Now this seemed to be quite enough for [him], as he at once climbed off the wagon tounge amid the cheers and laughter of the other Indians."[3]

This Oregon-bound Simpson company in which McBride traveled was one of the foremost companies in the entire 1846 migration to arrive at Ft. Laramie, by virtue of their being among the first to have left from the nearer jumping-off point of St. Joseph, Missouri. In reaching the flooded North Platte crossing, the company was only four days behind the migration leaders, the California-bound Craig & Stanley party, which had reached the milestone known as Independence Rock four days earlier. The Simpson company would remain near the forefront of those emigrants who were headed for Oregon throughout the entire journey, and so they were among the first to make the various choices that would be presented to them along the way.[4]

McBRIDE: From the crossing of the North Platte, we bore almost westward over a rolling sagebrush plain for three days. On the 28th of June at noon we halted at the then most-noted point in all the Rocky Mountain country,

Independence Rock, on the banks of the Sweetwater River, a tributary of the Platte. It was our first touch of the real continental range, the Rocky Mountains proper. This noted landmark is about 2000 feet in length by half that in width, and seems to have been a solid rock set down in a plain. On every side except the west it is surrounded by level land. On the west the hills gradually grow into mountains, which are some of them thousands of feet high.

On the bold face and sides of this great granite boulder the names of travelers were inscribed in paint of every color and in letters of every styles. For 25 years it had been the grand register for every trapper, hunter, mountaineer, emigrant and explorer. Some of the names were even too dim for identification, while others, after many years, were as distinct as if they were the work of yesterday. The name of L. W. Hastings and A. L. Lovejoy, who passed in 1842, were very distinct on the southern side of the rock. The name of Neal [Cornelius] Gilliam, dated in 1844, was quite distinct; and many others were recognized by persons of our party as those of old friends who had passed in years gone by.

Independence Rock, perhaps the most famous Oregon Trail landmark, was so named for being a "mile stone" emigrants hoped to reach by July 4, "Independence" Day. Arriving by then meant they were "on schedule" to reach the settlements before inclement fall weather set in. The Simpson company having arrived at this milestone on June 28 meant that they were nearly a full week ahead of schedule at that important reckoning point.

From there they traveled almost 100 miles, squeezing through Devil's Gate, the narrow canyon through which the North Platte's Sweetwater tributary had cut its hazardous course over the years. Then they climbed up and over South Pass, the point on the Oregon Trail high atop the Rocky Mountains through which all emigrants passed upon first entering into the Oregon Territory, which laid on the western side of the Continental Divide.

McBRIDE: ... we traveled up the valley of the Sweetwater River, lofty hills reaching at intervals the height of mountains inclosing it the most of the distance. ... Near the head of the Sweetwater we came upon the camp of three men; the leader was ***Lansford W. Hastings****, his comrade was a man by the name of Hudspeth and a California vaquero (herder). Hasting's [sic] name was familiar to us from his journal of the journey in 1842, which had been published in Cincinnati, I think, and was in the hands of our party. It had been used as a guide book, and seeing the author of it was like meeting a friend. Hasting's mission was to meet the overland emigration and induce as much of it as possible to go to California. He had gone originally to Oregon and then in 1843 to California. He painted the attractions of California in glowing colors; and he was a man of plausible manners and fine address, he made some impression, and finally a portion of our train changed their destination further on at the regular cutoff.*

Lansford W. Hastings (whose name they had just seen inscribed on Independence Rock) loomed large in the early days of the Oregon-California Trail. He had first sowed the seeds for what was now occurring back in 1842,

when as a twenty-three-year-old Ohio attorney-turned-adventurer, Hastings had come west in the very first small wagon train for Oregon, captained initially by Elijah White, then by Hastings, and finally by their guide, trapper Steven Meek. The next year Meek led Hastings and others who were dissatisfied with Oregon down the Hudson's Bay Company Old Trappers' Trail southward into California, where Hastings found the paradise for which he had been searching. Historian Bernard DeVoto later wrote that Hastings may have come to see himself to the Bear Flag Republic "as a kind of Sam Houston, president of another Lone Star Republic."[5]

Hastings then returned east in 1844, where in the spring of 1845 he published the widely circulated book called the *Emigrant's Guide to Oregon and California,* which sang the praises of the future "Golden State" -- the land of perennial spring. Widely promoted by Hastings, his guidebook became a kind of "Emigrant's Bible," which had great influence over the 1846 migration, and was also largely responsible for the fact that such a high percentage of emigrants turned off to California in that year. With these credentials, it is easy to see why McBride said meeting Hastings "was like meeting a friend."

Finally, Hastings had returned to California, and in the spring of 1846 had again headed eastward back over the Sierra-Nevada Mountains, this time accompanied by mountain men James Clyman, as well as James M. Hudspeth, in a party including sixteen other men, three women and two children. They followed a new route that left the regular California Trail west of modern-day Elko, Nevada, and headed southeastwardly across the Great Salt Lake Desert, then south of the Great Salt Lake, and finally northeast to Ft. Bridger, located on the Oregon Trail in the southwestern corner of present-day Wyoming. This new route would become known as the Hastings' Cut-off.[6]

The "regular" route to California followed the Oregon Trail north of the Great Salt Lake to a turnoff located forty-five miles past Ft. Hall at Raft River, where the "California Trail" diverged southward from the Oregon route, and then followed the Humboldt River into Nevada and on across the Sierra-Nevada Mountains. This regular route was first used by the Bidwell-Bartleson company on horseback back in 1841. The new California route proposed by Hastings instead went from Ft. Bridger *south* of the Great Salt Lake, but eventually met back up with the "regular" Humboldt River route, and then followed it on over the Sierras.

McBRIDE: It was in the morning that we passed Hastings, who was waiting to gather a train for his promised land. We obtained considerable information from him as to routes, proper places to rest and recruit our teams, the particular drives that were long and waterless, etc. At one o'clock in the afternoon we descended a gradual slope for a mile, and in a flat basin in an almost level plain found ourselves in Pacific Springs, and had crossed the backbone of the American continent. Though 1,200 miles stretched between us and the land of promise, the valley of the Willamette, we were in Oregon, the

land of our destiny, and weary but hopeful going slowly but cheerfully on our way.

Although McBride did not come right out and say so, the Simpson company was bound for Oregon, and therefore was apparently not influenced by Hastings' appeal for changing their intended direction and following him on his new improved route to California. They did, however, obtain from Hastings useful information about the route they were following to Oregon.

McBRIDE: It was on the fourth day of July when we took leave of the waters that run through the Atlantic, and passed to those which seek the western ocean, the boundary between the Indian and Oregon Territories.

What McBride referred to as the "Indian Territory," was President Jefferson's large 1803 Louisiana Purchase, through which the emigrants had traveled ever since departing from Missouri. In crossing over the Continental Divide at South Pass, they were finally leaving that vast expanse of land and entering into what was known as the Oregon Territory, which was claimed by both America and Britain.

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McBRIDE: At Pacific Springs we had our first view of the region then known on the map as the American Desert. Its flanks were in sight and plainly warned us that we had indeed entered upon a region unlike any we had yet seen. ... As the day closed, two men with one pack horse carrying blankets and supplies came into camp from the west. One who had gone to Oregon the year before and spent the winter there, as he said, was of the name of [Wales B.] Bonney; the other was a trapper who left Jackson county. Missouri, about five years before, named Hawkins. He had joined Bonney at Fort Bridger about 100 miles west, and intended to get to Fort Laramie. Hawkins left his home in Missouri an invalid, seeking the mountain climate for his health. He was now 30 years of age, and a perfect specimen of health and vigor. He was dressed in buckskin throughout except for a heavy drill cotton shirt. He was an acquaintance of G. O. and G. W. Burnett, of our camp, and regaled us with interesting accounts of his life as a mountaineer.

Another chronicler had told of having met a man near Independence Rock on July 10 "who read us a letter from Mr. Hastings, giving information respecting the best road to [California]." Wales Bonney was said to have been hired by Hastings to present this letter to passing emigrants, explaining how Hastings had gone on to Fr. Bridger, where he would meet emigrants who chose to follow him over his new route to California. Again, the Simpson company emigrants were apparently no t influenced to change their Oregon course, but were entertained by his companion's tales of mountain life.[7]

McBRIDE: Two days' travel from Pacific Springs took us to the Big Sandy River, a tributary of the Colorado known as Green River. Here the

famous Greenwood cutoff branched from the main road as a shorter route, and it was said that from this point to Green river by that route was 60 miles of sand and desert. All the mountain men warned us against taking this route, and tales of suffering and disaster were rehearsed [recounted] to us by those who had gone that way. It shortened the distance many miles, but was perilous to slow moving ox teams of emigrants.

Because the Simpson company was nearly a full week ahead of schedule, it was not necessary for them to gamble on taking any short-cuts that might save them a few days travel time. Besides, these new routes always seemed to come with other potential collateral problems, such as the emigrants' work oxen being subject to going for long stretches without food or water. So the Simpson company avoided the Greenwood Cut-off and stuck to the regular – but longer -- route through Ft. Bridger, thereby placing themselves on the road to the new Hastings' Cut-off.

McBRIDE: We followed the Big Sandy River to its junction with Green River through three tedious days of heat and sand, Green River was a joy to the traveler. It was a bold, clear stream, about 250 feet wide, with broad bottoms, fine groves of cottonwoods on its banks, filled with fish, trout, and other varieties. We succeeded in fording it, but it was deep and dangerous, the water running into the wagon boxes and wetting their contents in many instances.

The day we crossed this stream we met another party of mountaineers on their way to St. Louis. One of the number was Milton [actually Solomon] Sublette, a brother of William L. Sublette, one of the most noted of the leaders of the western trappers and fur hunters. He was recently from California, and was quite outspoken in his criticism of Hasting's scheme of a new route to California. He said it was an impracticable route for teams, and if they attempted it, would lead to disaster. His predictions, however, were erroneous; for Hastings, having induced some 60 wagons to follow his leadership, piloted them safely through his proposed route to California.

Pursuing our journey in three days more we arrived at Fort Bridger, so called by courtesy. It was only a camp where some 50 trappers were living in lodges (Indian tents). A single cabin of logs, with a roof composed of willow brush, covered with earth composed the fort. It was in a pleasant, grassy valley at the base of the Uintah mountains, and several streams of mountain origin crossed through it on their way to Ham's fork of Green river. There was a large village of Indians of the Snake tribe encamped here, and a brisk traffic in dressed deer skins, buffalo robes, and moccasins went on during our stay with them, which was for the half of a day and following night.

From Pacific Springs on July 4th, McBride's two days to the Big Sandy, three days to Green River, and then three more days to Ft. Bridger, would have placed the Simpson company in Ft. Bridger some time around July 12th. Because these Oregon-bound emigrants had no interest in Hastings' new route to California, from there they turned northward and continued on, following the "regular" route of the Oregon Trail heading toward Ft. Hall, still a week or so

ahead of schedule.

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McBRIDE: From Bridger, we changed our course to northwest ... passing up the stream now called Muddy Crossing, the divide between the waters of Bear river and the Colorado, and striking the former just about the mouth of Smith's Fork. Viewed from the lofty summit of the hill overlooking the Bear river valley from the east, it was very beautiful. Broad meadows, green and fertile, through which the river flowed to the north, spread out for many miles, the mountains sloped, but not abruptly, toward the valley, and after the dry and gloomy deserts of the last two hundred miles, the sight was welcome.

Just as we had reached the level of the valley but a long descent, a horseman came into view. Without halting when he came to the head of the train, which he did in dashing mountaineery style, with his horse at nearly full run, he rode fiercely on. Every one wondered at his singular behavior, but we soon received an explanation. A jolly man about 50 years old came up from the same direction on horseback and saluted our party. Whilst he was making some excited inquiries as to whether we had seen a man, describing the recent horseman, one of our party, ***Mr. John M. Wilson,*** *an ex-Santa Fe trapper, walked up to our visitor and called out, "Why, Peg Leg, how do you do!" The stranger turned and recognized him, and there was a joyful handshaking between the two.*

This man of McBride's immediate "party" was thirty-seven-year-old ex-trapper John M. Wilson, who was traveling with two "Kimsey" sisters: his wife, Huldah, thirty-two, and Hilah, thirty-six, wife of **Absalom Smith,** age forty-one. These two Kimsey sisters were nieces of aunt "Polly" Kimsey Simpson, mother of their company leader, young Capt. Ben Simpson. Absalom and "Hiley" Kimsey Smith were our family's ancestors, and the parents of my dad's future paternal grandfather, then eight-year-old James Washington Smith, second of their four children who were all traveling with them.

McBRIDE: The man thus addressed was J. L. Smith, one of the most noted mountaineers in all the west, who had been nearly 20 years a trapper and fur hunter, and was known from the Mexican settlements of the south to the Hudson Bay company's stations on the north. He had fought Apaches in Mexico, had "captured" the horses of the Spanish Dons in California, lived among the Sioux and Crows, had a Snake Indian wife, and was as notorious for his lawlessness as for his success in all the walks of a trapper's life. He had been compelled by misfortune to part with one of his legs just below the knee in order to save his life; and he wore a rude wooden substitute manufactured by himself, and had long been known by the name of "Peg Leg Smith." ...

Here McBride confused the late Jedediah Strong Smith (1799-1831) and Thomas L. ("Peg Leg") Smith (1801-1866), both of whom were famous mountain men and traders of the era, and no relation to any of our "Smith"

ancestors. Smith's Fork was named for Jedediah Smith, who is credited with rediscovering South Pass through the Rockies, which had been founded in 1812 by early fur trappers and through which all trail emigrants now passed.[8]

McBRIDE: Our next point of interest was Soda Springs on Bear river ... situated in a sort of basin on the northern bank of the river, the largest tributary to Great Salt Lake. ... all these waters, including those of the Salt Lake region, formerly flowed into Snake river; and that by subsidence of the great basin waters, the current has been turned, and that Salt Lake has stolen from the Columbia river a part of its hereditary tribute. ... About 60 miles from Soda Springs brought us to Fort Hall on the banks of the Snake river.

Figuring about 120 miles from Ft. Bridger to Soda Springs and then sixty more miles to Ft. Hall -- 180 miles overall -- at 12 miles-per-day this would have taken roughly fifteen days from having departed Ft. Bridger on July 12. Thus the Simpson company would have arrived at Ft. Hall sometime around July 27. This important trading post – which was roughly one-hundred miles past the halfway point between Missouri and their eventual Willamette Valley destination -- was located just inside the eastern border of present-day Idaho, near what is now the town of Pocatello.

From Ft. Hall, the Simpson company – in which our Absalom Smith ancestors had been traveling from the very beginning -- would continue following the "regular" tried and true route into what is now the present-day *state* of Oregon; then over the Blue Mountains; across the Umatilla, John Day and Deschutes Rivers; and finally down to The Dalles of the Columbia River, at the end of the Oregon Trail. From there, all that would remain between these immigrants and their "promised land," would be a hazardous trip down the treacherous Columbia River rapids. And so far, everything about their journey had gone very well indeed.