Chapter Twelve
Terrible Canyon

On the Oregon Trail timing was everything. I had tried to investigate my Polk County roots when I first retired to neighboring Lincoln County in 1990, but I got absolutely nowhere. Apparently my timing was not right.

When, nearly seven years later, I awakened on the morning of January 1, 1997 – 150 years to the day after one set of my ancestors arrived in Polk County -- with the idea that I should try again, as chronicler McBride might have said, "the stars were now in perfect alignment." For this time a county employee was there to point me in the right direction, toward a local historian who would become my trail mentor. This guide just happened to have recently acquired what proved to be the two most indispensable sources of historical information about my ancestors on the Oregon Trail: *Two Smiths,* the just published genealogy of both my Absalom and James Smith families; plus the rediscovered *Levi Scott Remembrances,* that told the entire story of the Southern Route, which my newfound mentor had very recently recovered and returned from Alaska. Without these two volumes it is doubtful that I would have been able to fit the pieces of the whole story together.

As this story developed, I found it uncanny how important timing actually could be in some instances, where only a few days could spell the difference in taking the best route, or making it at all. The effects of too many delays had been especially significant when, in many of these instances, the road was not well defined. This often resulted in precious days lost either searching for either the best way to proceed or for lost or stolen cattle, looking for water along the route, recruiting worn-out oxen, or even taking time to actually build the road ahead as the emigrants trudged slowly along.

Delays were especially significant on the Hastings' Cut-off, where on at least three separate occasions the Donner party took five or more days to rest up for what lay ahead. Eventually the Donners missed by only a day or two making it over the Sierras before the early October 28 storm that snowed them in for the winter. Had they known in advance what they were up against, these emigrants surely would have pressed on instead of resting. But the Donner party was not the only group of emigrants for which time played a critical role. Time also proved to be a decisive factor for the Donners' former Oregon-bound traveling companions, as the James Smith party was to learn as they approached the dreaded Umpqua Canyon.

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Back on the Southern Route it was already nearing mid-October, and the 1846 South Road emigrants had just embarked upon the third and final leg of what had become a much longer-then-expected journey. They had finally passed over the Cascade Mountains, and entered into a belt lying east of the Coast Mountains, that consisted of a series of cross ranges and valleys that interlock these two great ranges from west to east. They were traveling through the Rogue River Valley, just north of the Siskiyou Mountains to the south, and approaching various broken ridges generally referred to as the Umpqua Mountains. Next came the Umpqua Valley, with the Calipooya Mountains beyond that. This would be the final barrier before entering into the Willamette Valley and the settlements beyond. It was now well into October, and the weary emigrants were still a long way from these settlements.

These South Road travelers were then following the Old Trappers' Trail up through the Rogue River Valley, traveling generally the route that would much later become present-day I-5. Our James Smith ancestors were still attached to the company led by Capt. Rice Dunbar, as they had been from the beginning. Dunbar was following the lead company still commanded by Capt. Medders Vanderpool, with the entire South Road wagon train now under the unquestioned leadership of explorer and guide Capt. Levi Scott.

Capt. Vanderpool had "a fine flock of about fifty head of sheep" which he had brought safely all the way from Missouri. While eating breakfast on October 13 at a camp on the Rogue River, during a brief moment of inattention the stealthy Indians had made off with the entire flock, and the emigrants could not effectively hope to recover them. One family's future livelihood gone in an instant – vanished completely -- virtually within the blink of an eye.[1] On that same day chronicler Pringle observed that the lead company had moved only one mile to a spring and spent the day exploring ahead, "the road not being marked."

SCOTT: ... on the second day after we crossed Rogue River, we had come to a place where the road cutters had done nothing, and it was impossible for us to pass with the wagons. So the train was brought to a halt. I went forward, and after searching for a long time I found a place where we could pass by cutting through the thick bushes for about a furlong [220 yards]. Three days from here we struck the head of a small branch running into Grave Creek which we followed down to its junction, through heavy timber and thick bushes. The road had been so poorly opened that the train was frequently compelled to stop and remove obstacles that ought to have been cleared away by the [Applegate road-building] party in advance of us.

At what later came to be known as "Grave" Creek, just over the crest of the Umpqua Mountains, the emigrants stopped to bury young sixteen-year-old Martha Crowley, who finally died of typhoid fever she probably contracted in coming over the Rocky Mountains, as was the case with many emigrants. Her unfortunate mother, forty-four-year-old "Katie" Linville Crowley, would have

her family decimated by the 1846 migration. She lost seven in all (five of them after mid-October on the last leg of the South Road), including three older children, a baby grandchild, her 72-year-old mother "Mollie" Linville, and her husband Thomas, leaving her a widow with five young children to care for.

"The Indians seemed to be hanging about us now constantly," Scott remarked, "and they were growing bolder, and harassing us continually." The emigrants put out a strong guard, with instructions to fire off a gun every fifteen minutes at night, to apprise the Indians of their watchfulness. This seemed to give some relief, but it also had the effect of keeping the emigrants awake. Scott had earlier described their situation as being "in a state of quasi-siege," for most of the journey.[2]

This permanent Indian "state of siege" required the emigrants to follow an almost military-like discipline, and added to the difficulties and danger of the new route. Plus it increased greatly the potential for delays, loss of livestock, and even death. Even more importantly, this factor gradually took its toll on the effectiveness of a company that was already stretched far too thin. Having to drive and tend to oxen which had been greatly weakened by the route, clear the road ahead when necessary, and then stay up all night on guard duty, proved to be more than should have been expected of simple family farmers en route to claim their "promised land."

Three days later, on Oct. 18 according to Thornton, when they finally reached the canyon at the bottom of the Umpqua Mountains the emigrants welcomed a visit by a small relief party from the settlements. Among this party was South Road explorer Jack Jones, who had returned to the settlements earlier with the road-working party. Jones and Tom Smith of Oregon City had then driven a few beef cattle for the much-appreciated relief of the emigrants.

They had traveled south with the sons of Elam Brown & David Allen, who were searching for their fathers' incoming company. Having not found them coming through The Dalles on the northern route a month earlier, their sons now expected instead to meet them on the new South Road. According to Thornton, these sons continued further eastward on down the back trail with some emigrants, still searching for their fathers' company.

Brown & Allen returned on October 26 having not located their fathers, and proceeded on back to the settlements. Thornton hired young Allen to take a bag of his clothing with him. It wasn't until Thornton visited with Elam Brown during a later trip to California that he learned the story of how the fathers had rejected the South Road in the Black Rock Desert, and had then turned around and proceeded instead on into California, continuing on down the California Trail.[3]

In answer to the emigrants many questions about the road ahead, Jones and Smith told them of the upcoming difficulties. Tom Smith especially "depicted the insurmountable difficulties before them in such graphic terms that the people seemed to be stunned with amazement, bordering on despair." He told

them specifically that "it would be impossible for them ever to go through the Umpqua Canyon with wagons, just as the Hess party had warned the exploring party on their way out.[4]

Upon the emigrants hearing this depressing news it was difficult for Scott to get the company moving again. Eventually he convinced four emigrants to accompany him forward to evaluate the situation that lay ahead. "We struggled through the worst ten miles for a road I ever saw." However, they decided that by employing the entire company they "might" be able to put the road through the canyon in condition for travel. Scott had changed his tune entirely from when earlier upon the exploring party's searching for a route through the canyon, he commented that this was "a better place for a road than we had hoped to find…."

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Scott told how the South Road procession then stopped entirely, while every "able-bodied" man in the company that could be spared worked on the canyon "with an earnestness and energy that produced very satisfactory results." But even after working through the canyon for five days, they concluded that for a variety of reasons, "it would not be possible for them to get the wagons through on the road we had made!"

The swift, rocky creek running through the canyon posed a serious impediment that could be neither remedied nor avoided, due to the high perpendicular canyon walls. The creek bed was strewn with boulders up to four feet in diameter that the emigrants had neither the means nor the time to remove. Fortunately, there was not a lot of water running through the bed of the creek, so they were able to throw in logs and brush along with earth and stones, to build bridges for the wagons to get past these impediments – perhaps -- if they were fortunate. Having no viable alternative they had no choice but to attempt it anyway.

The way chronicler Virgil Pringle described this passage, from Friday, October 21, to Sunday, October 25, "we were occupied in making 5 miles to the foot of Umpqua Mountain and working the road through the pass, which is nearly impassable." Then, the lead company started through the canyon "on Monday morning [October 26] and reached the opposite plain on Friday night [October 30], after a series of hardships, break-downs, and being constantly wet and laboring hard and very little provisions to eat, the provisions being exhausted in the whole company. We ate our last [meal] the evening we got through."

PRINGLE: The wet season commenced the second day after we started through the mountains [October 28] and continued until the first of November, which was a partially fair day. The distance through: 16 miles. There was great loss of property and suffering, no bread, live altogether on beef. Leave one wagon.

According to Scott, they had an extremely difficult time bringing the first wagons through the canyon over their improvised road improvements. The bed of the creek in many places was "a slick, smooth rock, pitching down at a steep angle, or with an equally steep dip to one side, over which the wagons …" had to "be steadied, and let down with ropes." The creek bed was so narrow that when one wagon had to stop for the emigrants to make improvements in the roadbed, all the wagons behind had to stop and wait, and this caused unnecessary delays.

In the beginning, when there was very little water running through the canyon's creek bed, the journey was very hazardous and difficult. But when the showers started on October 28, the stream began filling up with water, which soon disarranged or washed away completely most of the temporary road improvements. After a few hours of rain the deluge of water flooded the creek bed and raised it to swimming stage, making the trip impossible for teams and their wagons!

Those in the front of the company did very poorly. Those behind them fared even worse. The emigrants traveling in Dunbar's rear company – our James Smith ancestors still among them – were forced to discard their wagons and most of their belongings, and get themselves and what was left of their supplies through the terrible canyon the best way they could. For them the canyon was a complete and total disaster.

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On November 4, Thornton described coming upon two wagonless emigrants, who must have been our James and Elizabeth Smith ancestors, with their new baby Elza, who had been born just before they had departed from Missouri:

*THORNTON: Upon approaching near the entrance of the close canyon we came to where many most miserable, forlorn, haggard, and destitute-looking emigrants were encamped.... Some of the men appeared to be stupefied by their misfortunes. One of them, a **Mr. Smith,** had lost every thing, and he appeared to be overwhelmed. His wife had on a coarse and tattered calico dress. She was thinly clad, and the covering for her head was an old sun-bonnet. Her child was not in a better condition, while that of the husband was, perhaps, even more pitiable. They ... were so weak, in consequence of want of food that it was believed they would scarcely live through the journey.*

I remonstrated with this hapless fellow traveler, persuading him that it would be better for him, and his wife, to perish in the cold snow of the canyon, than to await a more miserable death by starvation at that place. He seemed to see at once the folly of remaining there, either to brood over his calamities, or to heap harmless anathemas upon the head of his betrayer. He immediately took up his child, and about a pound of food, and desired his afflicted and almost helpless companion to follow him.

A relative of his of the same name had been standing at that place a few days before, counseling with some of the party, as to the means of escaping their present danger. As he was thus anxiously deliberating, death summoned him away, and he fell dead in a moment, leaving a poor widow with seven helpless and almost starving children. I was informed that they had nothing for food, but the flesh of the cattle that had just perished ....[5]

Forty-one-year-old Smith party leader William Smith was said to have dropped dead from being both under-nourished and overly exhausted, while in the midst of standing there encouraging his fellow-Smith party members to carry on with their efforts and to not give up. His widow Ellen was left with a family of nine young children to care for, all under age seventeen.

William Smith's nine-year-old daughter, Angeline Smith (Crews), in her later remembrances correctly identified her father as the Smith who had dropped dead suddenly. This is confirmed by the fact that the James and Henry Smith brothers are known to have survived the canyon and lived to old age in the settlements. According to William Smith's daughter Angeline, her Smith family was not actually related to the man she and her siblings referred to throughout their lives as "Uncle" Henry, due to his special relationship in looking out for them after their father William Smith's sudden death in the canyon. (This author's Smith family records agree entirely with her recollection in this regard.)

Thornton naturally assumed that all the Smiths in the "Smith" party were related, but unfortunately he did not provide any "given" names in describing them. The first "Mr. Smith" mentioned by Thornton in connection with William Smith could have been either of the brothers James or Henry Smith, but was most likely James Smith and his wife Elizabeth, who always wore the tell-tale "old sun-bonnet" described by Thornton.[6]

After his encounter with the Smiths, Thornton then went on to describe in great detail his own family's considerable difficulties in getting through the canyon on foot:

THORNTON: Reluctantly leaving our follow-travelers, we proceeded on until we came near the entrance of the canyon. I greatly feared that Mrs. Thornton [a semi-invalid when the journey began] should perish in it. ... The canyon ... is about three miles long, having the whole of its width occupied by a very swift stream of cold snow-water, varying from one foot and a half to four feet in depth, and running over a bottom covered with boulders from four inches to five feet in diameter. The rocky walls on each side are in many places perpendicular .... Through the valley the stream flows in a serpentine course, so that the traveler is obliged to ford it forty-eight times, when he finds himself upon the open plain, on the north side of the mountain distant about twenty miles from where he first entered the pass....

Mrs. Thornton, upon suddenly descending into the cold snow water, above the waist, was much chilled, and I thought she should [would] perish. I

chafed her temples, face and wrists, and she revived. ... We resumed our journey, and at length Mrs. Thornton began to lose all sensibility upon one side. I supported her as well as I could, but at length she complained of indistinctness of vision, and soon became totally blind. ... Her lips were thin and compressed, and a white and bloodless as paper; her eyes were turned up in their sockets; her head fell back upon my arm, and every feature wore the aspect and fixedness of death. I rubbed her wrists violently, chafed her temples, shook her, and called aloud to her. At length she revived, and with returning life sight was restored. She still complained, however, of partial insensibility on one side. But we hurried forward as well as we could; and at length, in great exhaustion, and chilled to death, we emerged from that cold mountain stream.

As we passed through this disastrous canyon ... we came to the tent of the Rev. Mr. Cornwall. ... There were several men about the fire. Among these was the Mr. [James] Smith, whom I had persuaded to attempt the passage. He got through, with his wife and child, and although almost exhausted, still he was now far more happy than persons generally are under circumstances much more favorable to happiness and comfort. We made a large fire and dried our garments as well as we could, by standing about in the open air, and under clouds, that frequently reminded us that they had not yet parted with all their contents.

I still had a morsel of food ... Mrs. Thornton prepared our little supper ... and we were grateful for it. I had Mrs. Thornton recline ... with her head and shoulders upon my arm, where we slept until morning, when she declared she had never enjoyed a better rest.[7]

November 5.—We resumed our journey, and after wading Canyon Creek thirty-nine times, we were enabled to avoid it by clambering along the side of the mountain. We at length emerged fully into the open plain, and about noon arrived at the place of general encampment, on the left bank of the [South] Umpqua River. Here I found the wrecks of all the companies who had been induced to enter upon a road along which our wagons were lying in scattered fragments ... which marked this disastrous cut-off. Some of the emigrants had lost their wagons; some their teams; some half [of all] they possessed; and some every thing. ... Mr. [Augustus] Humphrey was the only man who, so far as I have been able to learn, got to this point with a whole wagon and a complete team. All looked lean, thin, pale, and hungry as wolves. The children were crying for food; and all appeared distressed and dejected.[8]

SCOTT: As the emigrants emerged from the terrible place, they acted like a broken army of fugitives, each one striving to find a place of refuge for himself; and they did not seem to expect either aid or sympathy from each other. So they went on in squads of three or four wagons, and frequently, one wagon traveled alone. Some had broken their wagons in the Canyon, and left them, and some had lost so much of their teams that they were compelled to abandon their wagons. Some packed their provisions and beds on a horse; some on an ox; and some, who had neither horse, mule, nor ox, packed all they had upon a cow; while a few, who had no animal left, took a pack upon their

shoulders, and trudged on as best they could towards the settlements.

Thornton had drawn the same "defeated army" analogy in describing the canyon after the rear company emigrants had discarded their wagons and belongings:

THORNTON: We passed household and kitchen furniture, beds and bedding, books, carpets, cooking utensils, dead cattle, broken wagons, and wagons not broken, but nevertheless, abandoned. In short, the whole road presented the appearance of a defeated and retreating army having passed over it, instead of one over which having passed a body of cheerful and happy emigrants, filled with high hopes and brilliant expectations, and about to enter a land of promise.[9]

In a letter back home, Pringle's mother-in-law, sixty-six-year-old widow Tabitha Brown echoed this same theme, in describing her Canyon experience:

TABITHA BROWN: I rode through in three days at the risk of my life, on horseback, having lost my wagon and all that I had but the horse I was on. Our families were the first that started into the canyon, so we got through the mud and rocks much better than those that came afterward. Out of the hundreds of wagons only one came through without breaking. The canyon was strewn with dead cattle, broken wagons, beds, clothing and everything but provisions, of which latter we were nearly all destitute. Some people were in the canyon two and three weeks before they could get through. Some died without any warning, from fatigue and starvation. Others ate the flesh of cattle that were lying dead by the wayside.

After struggling through mud, rocks and water up to our horse's sides much of the way in crossing this twelve mile mountain, we opened into the beautiful Umpqua Valley, inhabited only by Indians and wild-beasts. We had still another mountain to cross, the Calipose, besides many miles to travel through mud, show, hail, and rain.[10]

Had it not been for the early rainstorm that commenced on Wednesday, October 28, most of the South Road emigrants might at least been able to have brought their wagons and teams safely through the terrible canyon, hopefully with most of their belongings and equipment intact. Or, had these unwary emigrants arrived at the canyon only a week or so earlier, they might have avoided completely the devastating effects the storm had on the temporary structures they had built to get them and their wagons safely through.

There is no question that it was this early storm that proved to be the final undoing of the South Road emigration. Due to the effects of this storm there remained one last tragic irony in the entire 1846 migration pertaining to the similarities between the two new routes of "enticers" Jesse Applegate and Lansford W. Hastings, as well as the former Smith and Donner party traveling companions.

Oregon Spectator editor George Curry was one of the 1846 emigrants who traveled in the Russell pack party along with chronicler Edwin Bryant, and together with these packers Curry almost ended up taking Lansford W. Hastings' new route to California, which the Donner party chose to follow. However, at the last minute Curry changed his mind and on July 18 left Ft. Bridger and proceeded on to Ft. Hall, where he arrived just before Jesse Applegate got there to "entice" travelers onto Applegate's new Southern Route. Thus Curry narrowly avoided both these two "enticers" and their "superior" new routes, and ended up traveling instead on the northern route, which brought him safely into the Oregon settlements in time to report on the progress of emigrants who had taken the Southern Route, as new editor of the newspaper.[11]

Historian Dale Morgan noted how at Oregon City editor Curry recorded in his diary on October 28 how it had commenced raining "'as though winter was about to set in. We have had very fine weather up to this time.' Far to the south, this same storm turned back the Donner Party just short of Donner pass." Chronicler Edwin Bryant wrote in his journal that "the rain began at Sutter's [Fort] on the night of the 28th.

"Now emigrants on the California and Oregon trails would begin to know real hardship and suffering."