Chapter Sixteen
Barlow Road

Moses "Black" Harris, born around 1800 in South Carolina, had played many prominent roles in the unfolding of this story of early Oregon Trail expansion. Mountaineer Harris had first emerged as a guide for the 1844 migration. Next he was mentioned by John Shively halfway through the 1845 migration, as searching with Indian Sub-Agent Dr. Elijah White for a new wagon road directly across central Oregon to the Cascade Mountains through a depression in the mountain to the headwaters of the Santyam River.

Harris then re-emerged later in 1845 when he was recruited at The Dalles by fellow-mountaineer Stephen Meek, to act in Meek's place in taking back the supplies and equipment necessary to bring the suffering 1845 Meek Cut-off emigrants over the Deschutes River so they could reach the mission. The next year, Black Harris played a role as a member of both 1846 exploring parties in discovering the new Southern Route -- including Harris having accompanied David Goff in diverting the first travelers onto this new route. Then Harris became a member of Jesse Applegate's advance road-building party, whose job had been to clear the way for the emigrants who had embarked on that venture.

Nearly two months after this road party arrived in the settlements in early October, Harris wrote a letter that was published in the November 26 *Oregon Spectator* praising the "shorter and all respects better" Southern Route, that "made it easy for wagons to pass between Oregon and California." He also stated that South Road emigrants had crossed the Cascades more than "five weeks ago" (carefully avoiding the issue of whether they had as yet arrived in the settlements). Likewise, Harris (who as a member of the road party had no first-hand knowledge of the actual South Road emigration led by Scott) had also claimed that only one family had to abandoned their wagon, while emigrants using the new Barlow Road in 1846 had not arrived safely as reported. He also stated that many on the Barlow Road had not even reached the Cascades as yet, nor would they this season; and that the route had caused loss of life as great as any previous year's emigration. All of Harris' wild claims proved to be virtually the opposite of the true situation.

Despite Harris's protestations that the South Road emigrants were in no difficulty, he was among the few settlers who set out to rescue these same suffering emigrants from the new route he had played a prominent role in enticing them into undertaking. Curiously, Harris' comments about emigrants on

the Barlow Road in 1846 not having reached the settlements safely as reported by others, had not motivated him to attempt to rescue those supposedly missing Barlow Road emigrants.

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Sometime around July 28, 1846 – about ten days or so before the James Smiths departed Ft. Hall on Jesse Applegate's new route through southern Oregon -- our Absalom Smith ancestors had already left that place still traveling in the company led by their cousin, Capt. Ben Simpson. Having departed the fort well before Jesse Applegate arrived there on August 8 to "entice" the newly arriving 1846 emigrants, the Simpson company had known nothing of Applegate's "shorter and better" route into the settlements. Hence they were destined to follow the "regular route" to The Dalles of the Columbia. From there, they would eventually have no choice but to travel down the treacherous Columbia River rapids near the end of their journey, just as most of three previous year's emigrants had done before them – including those who the year before had sought a way to avoid this perilous river trip by taking the new Meek Cut-off in 1845.

The Simpson company proceeded along the regular route down the valley of the Snake River – a huge body of water which at that point was 200 yards wide and carried an immense volume of water. Thirty miles southwest of Fort Hall they passed the American Falls, "where the great river took its plunge." McBride reflected on how in 1811 Wilson Price Hunt, a partner in John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company, set out from St. Louis with a party of fifty-nine souls to establish the first fur trading post on the Columbia River. "They had grown weary of land travel 100 miles above, and had undertaken to navigate this ferocious stream to the sea in canoes, with the result of the loss of the entire fleet and baggage." By the time they arrived at the ocean seventeen months later, they were down to only thirty-five persons, and had lost all of their provisions.

McBRIDE: Now commenced an experience [of] long and tiresome marches. The hills came close up to the river, and the road was rugged and steep. On the third day from Fort Hall, at noon, we arrived at a stream flowing from the south, called Raft river. It carried but little water, as the dry plain through which it flowed seemed to absorb it in its ashy soil. Here two women and eight men, having decided to go to California instead of Oregon took what was called the "California Trail" up Raft river. There were several men by the name of Rhodes, two by the name of Kimsey -- Alva [Alvis] and Thomas -- relatives of Simpsons, who remained with us, who composed this party. Alvis Kimsey made the famous race with my father on the Platte when our horses were stolen by the Pawnees; and the parting with these friends was very solemn. It seemed sad to see them drive away from us, so few in number, when we knew the difficulties between them were so much greater than our own; but

we bade them goodbye, expecting it would perhaps be the last; and each company took its own direction. …

Alvis and Thomas Kimsey were nephews of aunt Polly Kimsey Simpson, sons of her brother Samuel. Alvis Kimsey was roughly the same age as his cousin, Capt. Ben Simpson, and was also married to Ben's invalid sister Cassia. So in addition to being first cousins, the two were also brothers-in-law. As such, Alvis had become their captains' "right-hand-man," so to speak, accompanying him on the many difficult but necessary tasks involved with trail leadership. Here, McBride was alluding to the story of back on the plains when the horses and a mule McBride's many sisters had taken turns riding were missing one night after a thunderstorm. Finally identifying their trail by a peculiar mark, it was Capt. Ben Simpson and Alvis Kimsey who had accompanied McBride's father in searching for the animals, while the company kept moving under temporary command of Glen Burnett.[1]

The three searchers ended up being attacked by 150 Pawnee "savages of the plains," and were pursued on horseback as they galloped back to where Burnett had circled the wagons in anticipation of trouble. Eventually the Pawnees proved to be peaceful, professing to know nothing of the stolen animals and wanting to trade for tobacco and ammunition. But the incident had resulted in the emigrants developing a heightened awareness of this ever-present danger, and, as McBride recalled, his now horseless sisters having to walk the rest of the way to Oregon. These two departing Kimsey brothers (first cousins to Hiley Kimsey Smith) would be sorely missed, but such were the "travails of the trail," where most relationships were but a fleeting merger of convenience -- joining and separating along the way as need arose.

Raft River marked the point forty-five miles west of Ft. Hall, known as the "parting-of-the-ways," where the California Trail branched off southward from the Oregon Trail. The California-bound travelers taking this cut-off proceeded southwesterly into present-day Nevada until they reached the Humboldt River, which eventually led them almost up and over the Sierra-Nevada Mountains, and on into California. In the meantime their Oregon-bound brethren would begin eventually bending northwesterly along the Snake, heading down toward the mighty Columbia (see map).

McBRIDE: From Raft river to the crossing of the Snake river, about 100 miles, our way was down the vales [valley] of the Snake, over dry, barren and rocky desert country, with long distances between camps. The sun's rays during the day seemed to scorch the earth, which was at all times hot and dusty. The river had entered a canyon near the American Falls, and we touched it only once or twice again before arriving at Salmon Falls. We saw it several times as it rolled through this inaccessible canyon hundreds of feet in depth. In its lower portion it is from 600 to 1,000 feet deep, and is literally carved through the lava, which forms the surface of the plain above; and the rift in which the river

runs becomes for many miles a mere crack in the crust of the earth.

The Simpson company followed the route described by Sam Barlow and Joel Palmer from the previous year's 1845 migration, which would lead them up the Boise valley, over the Blue Mountains and across the Grand Round Valley down to the Umatilla River, and then following along the Columbia past its John Day and Deschutes tributaries, until they finally reached The Dalles. This leg of the trip was uneventful, if not monotonous, and the travelers covered the 610 miles from Ft. Hall to The Dalles in roughly one-and-one-half months, traveling at a respectable average speed of thirteen miles-per-day.

McBRIDE: The descent from the point where we emerged from the timber and saw the Umatllla [River], five miles away, at our feet, was accomplished in safety. We dropped 2000 feet, after having had a distant view of the valley of the Walla Walla, 30 miles to the northeast, and the bare undulating country between us and the Columbia river, which we were to reach in a distance of 40 miles.

Our first view of the Cascade range was from this eminence; and Mount Hood, though 150 miles away, glistened in the golden light of the setting sun. That same peak looked down upon the beautiful valley which was to be the end of our tedious wandering, we were told, and we all felt in gazing upon it that we were drawing near home; beyond it all our toils were to end.

We had no more exasperating or toilsome chapter in the long journey than from the day we arrived at the Columbia river till we arrived at The Dalles, Oregon, the eastern base of the Cascade mountains. The road was generally level, the descent of the hills to John Day's river crossing and the ascent from it excepted, but it was a long, wearying drag through heavy sands, and sometimes over wagon-destroying, river-washed boulders. The hoofs of our teams were worn out; many were greatly exhausted, the grazing had become extremely scarce, and ignorant of the value of the bunch grass of the hills we continually horded our stock on the course tough grass on the little narrow bottoms, near the river. Many oxen gave out and laid down to die or refused to proceed, and were left behind.

At The Dalles was a mission station which had been established for many years; and although Rev. Mr. Waller came out and held religious services in camp on the Sabbath evening we rested there, our party was scarcely prepared in spirit for his ministrations. With the fierce winds that assailed us, the flying sands, and the cheerless aspect of the country round about, the scene was dismal; and although we expected in a fortnight to reach our destination, the very dreariness of our present forbidding surroundings was a warning against the hopes we had cherished of the glorious Willamette. Gloom instead of happiness was the prevailing sentiment.

McBride's excessive "gloom" at their having finally reached a "dreary"

scene around the Wascopan Methodist Mission at the end of the Oregon Trail was likely the attitude of the entire Simpson company, in which our Smith and Kimsey ancestors were still traveling. So very close to the valley settlements, they were exhausted and now faced the dismal prospect of a perilous watery venture down the treacherous Columbia River rapids, on the final leg of their long journey to the "promised land," which lay ahead -- just beyond their reach.

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McBRIDE: We here met Thomas J. Brown, a young man about 25 years old, a son of Captain [Elam] Brown, whose company had lost their stock on the South Platte. He had gone to Oregon the year before, and was on his way to meet his father. As already stated the father had taken the Applegate route by way of Humboldt river ….

The gratifying news was brought us by him that the wagon road which had been partially constructed the previous autumn across the Cascades, south of Mount Hood, had been completed and that the first party bound for the Willamette on that route was now about 40 miles in advance of our company. This would save us the perils of the trip by canoes down the Columbia river, which had been heretofore taken by all emigrants and required that stock should be driven over the mountains by trail.

The history of this river navigation was one that recorded many a watery tragedy, and was always one of peril, and had been the dread of the latter portion of our journey. We gladly turned from that experience and struck out on the new road. Our route lay among the foothills of the Cascades and has been known since as the "Barlow Road." Mount Hood, lonely in its grandeur, towered far up into the sky, and seemed like a sentinel guarding the portals of the western paradise.

Although McBride did not mention it, judging from future events it is likely that Thomas Brown had just traveled over this new route from west to east in hoping to meet up with his father's company somewhere west of The Dalles. So Brown may have told the emigrants exactly what to expect on Barlow's new route, which appeared to offer several advantages. The exact path of the route was known, and it was much shorter than other new routes over the Cascades attempted in 1845 and 1846, so less could go wrong. And the road had been readied for wagon travel by laborers who worked on improving it all summer, in preparing it for travel. Perhaps best of all, it was not being "promoted" by its discoverer, and young Brown had no reason to exaggerate the route's suitability for wagon travel.

There *were* two serious drawbacks however! It would be steep going – the route did go across the south face of Mt. Hood after all, which at over 11,000 feet was Oregon's tallest volcano. And these emigrants' teams were weary from

having just pulled wagons across half a continent. Plus there was a toll charge of $5 per wagon and 10 cents per head for livestock, when $1 per day was considered good wages. However, Barlow did take “I.O.U.s” from those who did not have the funds to pay cash. All factors considered, the Barlow Road appeared to be well worth trying for the first time. This new mountainous route that was born from another route’s failure, did avoid the treachery of the Columbia River rapids, and also for the first time in the history of the Oregon Trail it would allow emigrant families to bring all they possessed into the settlements: their wagons with all their equipment and belongings, as well as their livestock and families.

The general "route" of what would become the Barlow Road had only been barely located the previous year, and it had not yet received its first wagons. A charter had been granted to Sam Barlow on December 18, 1845, by the territorial legislature, to open a toll road around the south side of Mt. Hood. However, actual construction of the road had not begun until late in the spring of 1846, when the mountain snow had melted sufficiently and the weather permitted. Forty laborers continued the roadwork while the route’s potential future first-time wagon travelers were already en route down the Oregon Trail from Missouri. When these emigrants finally arrived at The Dalles, the road was by then sufficiently ready for travel -- such as it was.

THE BARLOW ROAD IN 1846

The normally otherwise very cautious Simpson company embarked enthusiastically on Monday, September 14, on the new Barlow Road, happy to be presented with any alternative to the treacherous Columbia River. On the second night out from The Dalles, they reached Tygh Creek, which flows down the mountain to the Deschutes. This was near the same place where a year before, Steven Meek’s emigrants had crossed over the Deschutes River on their way to The Dalles. Here, McBride described what the emigrants believed to have been their first encounter with a cougar, which threatened their stock. The event was exceptionally noisy, but no damage or losses resulted.

McBRIDE: We resumed the trail the next day hoping we had experienced our last disaster, which proved true. Only a few hours before we were to turn our faces direct to the great range and be lost in its embrace until we should emerge into the Willamette we saw two men descending a long, steep hill in front of us; driving oxen before them. The camp wondered at such a sight; but my father had been for several days hopefully looking for what now occurred.

When we were upon the Boise a couple of men passed us on horse back, who stated their destination was the Yamhill settlement in the Willamette Valley, which they expected to reach by the first of September. Our teams had shown such signs of exhaustion even then that my father had written to some

old friends of his, who had preceded us some years and resided there, to meet us, if possible at The Dalles with fresh teams. They had received the letter, and with promptness which none but pioneers could emulate, and a generosity that makes gratitude a pleasing burden, they had answered the call and three yoke of strong fresh oxen and two horses laden with provisions and supplies came to our assistance.

That was a joyful meeting of old friends. J. J. Hembree and C. B. Gray were the messengers, and the contributions were from a settlement that joined to aid their brother emigrant. Our trip was assured; our weaker oxen were relieved from the yoke and driven idly along, while the fresh ones made our travel light and easy. We could sympathize with our less fortunate fellow travelers, but we did not leave them as we might have done, and with steady journeyings, accompanied by our friends, Hembree and Gray, we in eight days drove into camp where a rail fence was in sight and the log house of the settler reared its welcome but rude walls. This spot was McSwain's farm, twenty-five miles from Oregon City. That same autumn its owner sold it to a man by the name of [Philip] Foster, and for many years the station was known by that name [Foster's farm]. The second day after we reached Oregon City, where we spent a few hours.

Joel Jordon Hembree and Chiley B. Gray were members of McBride's Christian denomination, who had migrated in 1843, and settled in the Yamhill town of McMinville, named for their former Tennessee home. Coming along the North Platte River in that earlier migration, the Hembrees lost their six-year-old son when he was thrown out of their wagon by the constant vibration, and his head fractured by the wheels. This was the first death on the trail that year, occurring just nine days before wife Sally Hembree gave birth to a daughter.

McBride was strangely silent about the rest of the journey over the Barlow Road, as through the long journey west had ended for him the day Hembree and Gray arrived with new teams, and presumably relieved the young boy of his wagon-driving duties. It seemed almost as if this one event must have signaled for him that the long journey was now over and their "trip assured." After all, the Barlow Road itself was only about a 115 mile-extension of the Oregon Trail (which replaced the treacherous Columbia water route of the same distance), so it amounted to only about six percent of the entire trip from Missouri to the settlements. And the fortnight it took the Simpson company to cross it in 1846, was almost incidental when reckoned in half-year increments for the entire 2000-mile journey. However, as young Barnet Simpson and others described the new road – if it could be called a "road" -- "it was a terror."

Starting from the The Dalles of the Columbia, at an elevation of 150 feet, the road headed upslope through heavy wooded hills past Fifteenmile Creek, ascending rapidly up a long steep hill to an elevation of 2500 feet. Then within a few miles, "the road plunged 1400 feet down Tygh Grade to Tygh Creek."

Climbing 1000 feet up another very severe hill, the emigrants reached the east tollgate at what became Gate Creek, so named as where the toll gate was located. From here, the road continued its ascent, following up White River until it reached Boulder Point, on a road next year's chronicler Ison Cranfill referred to as "bad beyond description." From that point the road abruptly "plummeted" down Little Laurel Hill, and crossed the White River below, at 2800 feet elevation. Climbing once again toward the summit, the emigrants finally reached Barlow Pass, at an elevation of 4155 feet. "Here on the flanks of Mt. Hood, the road was at its highest point."

By the time the Simpson company had reached what was roughly half way in the Barlow Road journey, they had probably spent about a week on the new "road." They had a good camp, and prepared themselves for what would become known as the "ultimate challenge." This was the treacherous Laurel Hill -- a declivity "so steep that a year after opening significant erosion had occurred, and by 1852 the ruts were six feet deep. Negotiating this notorious slope required ingenuity. Some slid wagon beds down 60 percent grade or put two yoke of oxen on each end of the wagon. Others rough-locked wheels and/or dragged logs up to 100 feet long. Another option was to snub [repel] wagons around trees with ropes, a process which scarred some trunks badly, and ... possibly broke off 10- to 14-inch [in diameter] trees." Barnet Simpson commented that "none of the emigrants who came down this steep grade with men pulling on ropes to keep the wagons from running over the oxen, will ever forget Laurel Hill." On the excessively steep Barlow Road descending was more challenging than climbing.

The road continued down slope past Zigzag Canyon, and then across the Sandy River. Here again there was another sharp rise to Devil's Backbone, three hills that Ison Cranfill referred to as the "steepest hills in the Cascades." Then after crossing the Sandy a second time, the weary emigrants finally reached Philip Foster's farm near the Clackamas River. In two more days Simpson's Company arrived at the end of the trail in Oregon City on September 26, after spending thirteen days on the new Barlow Road.[2]

All in all, things had gone fairly well for the first time wagons were brought over this new route. The Simpson company had averaged nearly nine miles per day over the 115 miles from The Dalles to Oregon City. This was a reasonably good clip for a steep mountainous road, especially considering that most of the teams were worn out from having just crossed half a continent. This new "Barlow" Road was a long way from being a completely satisfactory wagon access into the Willamette Valley -- it was steep, and it still needed much work, plus it did require a toll charge. However, it was passable, and its users did get through in a very timely manner, with their wagons, belongings, equipment, and livestock for the most part intact.

In a letter to the editor of the *Oregon Spectator* dated October 29, 1846,

Sam Barlow stated that all the emigrants who came by his road “have all safely reached the valley,” having abandoned only five wagons in the crossing. Based on the tollgate count, Barlow numbered "one-hundred and forty-five wagons, fifteen hundred and fifty-nine head of horses, mules, and horned cattle all together, and one lot of sheep...." Using Joel Palmer's rough estimate of five persons per wagon, this amounted to over 700 men women and children, which was a substantial portion of the entire 1846 Oregon migration of “1100 to 1200 souls.”[3]

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McBRIDE: Our ideal of the Willamette had not yet appeared, and we were in haste to arrive at Yamhill where our friends resided, and at Oregon City those with whom we had made the long journey and my own family took leave of each other. The Burnetts went to the Tualatin plains, ***Smith and Wilson*** *concluded to rest for a day and then decide upon their new locality for a settlement. The Simpson family and kin concluded to go to Marion county, near Salem, while others wished to tarry and decide after a few days inquiry.*

There was no wanting emotion in this parting, for we had braved too many perils together, and were bound by too many common recollections to be different. I had my boyish attachments, and could not suppress my tears. I was so much affected at the parting that I quietly slipped away while they were performing the formal duty, wondering if their hearts swelled as mine did; for if I uttered a word it would have brought me to sobs.

McBride poignantly reminded us that these are the recollections of a barely fourteen-year-old boy who, although writing nearly a half-century later, could still be very moved in recalling the endearing friendships which were forged by those weary wagoners, and how difficult their parting must have been for all of them. McBride and his closest companions had endured the difficulties of traveling nearly 2000 miles across half a continent together for nearly half a year, during which time they knew every mile of the way that their very lives depended on one another to make it successfully through their mutual ordeal. His “parting” comment reminds us that because his and Absalom Smith’s two families had traveled so closely together during the entire journey, McBride’s account was the same story that could have been told by our own Smith ancestors, had they possessed both the inclination and literacy necessary to record their experience.

McBRIDE: From Oregon City to the Hembree settlement in Yamhill county was forty miles over a new road, through a heavy forest most of the distance. The gloom of those days was very trying to me. For the first time in nearly six months, our family was alone. We came to Cedar Creek, now in Washington county, about twelve miles from Chehalem Valley. The forest was deep and gloomy, tall ferns grew higher than my head; wolves made the woods

ring with their dismal howling; the booby owl booted his lonely note in chorus. My father and mother and sisters all seemed cheerful, and I popped my ox whip freely to relieve my despondency.

On the second afternoon we had slowly climbed the long ascent of the Chehalem Mountains, a group of high hills called by that name, and came out to our first fair view of the Willamette Valley. The sky was clear. It was in the closing days of September, and the landscape was a perfect picture for a hundred miles. We could see the valley stretching to the south, prairie and timber, sunshine and shadow, hills and streams, while the coast Range on the west and the lofty Cascades with their glittering snow peaks on the east bounded all. The French prairie just at our feet on the left, with fields of stubble, houses, fences, and barns, allowed us that we had arrived in the land of homes as well as of beauty. We halted, took a short noon meal, and my heartache was cured. I had seen the "promised land," and felt henceforth it was home. A few hours more, and we were under the roof of an old friend of other days, A. J. Hembree, and the long journey was at an end.

It was during these "closing days of September," that the Absalom Smith party members who had traveled alongside chronicler McBride, would become among the first of the Oregon-bound emigrants to bring wagons over the Cascade Mountains and safely into the settlements. Having departed from St. Joe and rejected the Greenwood Cut-off, eschewed Hastings new route to California, and passed through Ft. Hall before Jesse Applegate arrived there to entice them onto his new Southern Route to Oregon, fate had apparently intervened to lead our Absalom Smith ancestors onto the one new overland wagon route that would deliver them with their wagons safely into the Willamette Valley – both intact and on time – avoiding entirely the treacherous water route down the Columbia River. Knowingly or otherwise, they had made all the right choices, and were thus among the first emigrants in the entire 1846 migration to safely reach their eventual destination before October, with nearly all their wagons and belongings intact -- be that destination either Oregon or California.

More importantly, finally after three partial or total failures, together with much suffering and loss of both life and property, a suitable overland wagon route to the Willamette Valley settlements had finally been established as an extended part of the Oregon Trail! And our Absalom Smith ancestors had the distinction of being able to count themselves among the very first of the thousands of Oregon emigrants who would participate in and benefit from that successful undertaking for many years to come.