Chapter Two
James Smiths

"… the whole road presented the appearance of a defeated and retreating Army having passed over it ….."*

*Chronicler J. Quinn Thornton[1]

Of my family's eleven direct ancestors who crossed the plains during the period of early Oregon Trail expansion from 1845 through 1847, five married pairs of spouses were eventually laid to rest in three Polk County cemeteries, beside a host of relatives who had accompanied them. In the course of researching this story I visited these ten ancestors frequently on my numerous fact-finding trips to Polk County, to draw strength from being there among them and reflecting with them on what they had endured. My only trail ancestor from that period who was buried elsewhere was my dad's maternal grandfather, George Washington Smith (1842-1916), who coincidentally, was also the only one of these eleven ancestors who had lived long enough to have known my father – his grandson -- when dad (1901-1990) was growing up. For some reason unknown to us now, but probably having to do with his having developed prostate cancer, this married grandfather had been laid to rest alone in the old Lee Mission Cemetery, in downtown Salem, Oregon, in adjacent Marion County.

When I finally got around to searching out this great-grandfather's final resting place, I arrived there late in the day, and took a room at a Salem motel near the cemetery, where I could rest up for my day's search. Early the next morning I awoke with a start, jolted by a very vivid vision. It was the image of this grandfather telling my father how as a young boy he had walked barefoot the entire 2000 miles from Missouri to Oregon. For me this was a very poignant moment, during which my mind struggled to determine if I had actually "remembered" something my father had told me, or had simply dreamed it.

Finding grandfather George Washington Smith's grave proved easier than I had anticipated. After taking some time to introduce myself and pay my many respects during a long silent conversation, I wandered around the historic old place to see if I could find anything else of interest. Buried very close to my great-grandfather, I discovered the graves of J. Quinn Thornton and his wife Nancy, who I had come to know very well through Thornton's vivid chronicle of the entire journey. There had been one part of Thornton's journal that had been especially meaningful to my family, which I was reminded of at that time.

Thornton had written of his having encouraged my dad's future grandfather's parents, James and Elizabeth Smith, to keep going and not give up, after this large Smith party had undergone an especially perilous part of the

journey. I took great comfort in the thought that here was this same watchful traveling companion close at hand forever, next to George Washington Smith, still looking out for that barefoot little four-year-old boy as he continues on his long journey through eternity.

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J. Quinn Thornton, a thirty-six-year-old Illinois attorney-turned-emigrant, kept what many regard as perhaps the most complete and descriptive daily record of the 1846 migration. He traveled with his wife, Nancy M. Logue, age thirty-five, and their greyhound dog, Prince Darco. Childless and in ill health, both Thorntons were hoping that the "pure and invigorating" climate of Oregon would improve their condition. Being entirely unfamiliar with teams and wagons, Thornton had hired two young men to drive for him.

The Thorntons arrived at Ft. Laramie on June 28, well after fellow-chronicler John R. McBride had passed through there fourteen days earlier traveling with the Simpson company near the forefront of the 1846 migration. The reason for chronicler Thornton being two weeks behind the Simpson company at that point, was owing to the Simpsons having departed from the nearer St. Joseph, Missouri, jumping-off place. Those traveling alongside Thornton had left from Independence, Missouri, on May 13, 1846, and because they were among the last emigrants to leave from that more distant point of departure, they were positioned near the rear of the entire large 1846 migration. This seemingly unimportant “position” of their wagon would hold huge implications for all emigrants in the 1846 migration, as their journey unfolded and they neared their ultimate destination.

Soon after starting out, Thornton attached himself temporarily to the several wagons of a party traveling to California with Lilburn Boggs, Missouri governor from 1836 to 1840. Shortly afterwards they were joined on May 19 by eleven wagons of the James F. Reed and George & Jacob Donner party; and on May 21 were overtaken by the expected late arrival of ex-Gov. Boggs’ brother-in-law, Alphonso Boone, grandson of the celebrated frontiersman.

On June 2, the Oregon-bound Thorntons left Boggs’ California-bound party, and joined a party of twenty wagons headed for Oregon under the command of Capt. Rice Dunbar, with whom Thornton would remain until after crossing the Continental Divide. Prominent among this Dunbar company was a large Smith party of nearly three-dozen souls with six or so wagons, which had traveled under Dunbar’s leadership ever since its Missouri departure, and comprised over one-half of the Dunbar company.

This large Smith party included the families of: forty-three-year-old **James Smith,** and his wife Elizabeth Wright, thirty-three; his younger brother Henry Smith; his son-in-law John Long; and finally, acting Capt. William Smith, who had been a Missouri neighbors of the Smiths and Longs, but were

apparently related in name only. The James Smith's themselves had a large family of ten children, including a new baby boy Elza, born just twenty days before departing. Their third youngest child was four-year-old George Washington Smith, my dad's future maternal grandfather.

The James Smiths had originated from the same Washington County in western Virginia as our Absalom Smith ancestors, who were traveling two weeks ahead of them in the Simpson company. However, these two Smith families were not related; neither should Absalom Smith's son James Washington Smith be confused with James Smith, the father of George Washington Smith.[2]

The men of the Smith party, including James Smiths' oldest boy, twenty-one-year-old John, performed the demanding physical task of driving the several family wagons. The women usually rode in the wagons with their babies and young toddlers. The girls rode along on horseback and even on family cows, when such animals were available. Otherwise they walked barefoot with the young boys alongside the wagons, to save their new boots for when they would finally arrive at their Oregon destination.

As one of the few "learned men" in the 1846 migration, chronicler Thornton was among those called upon to perform distasteful tasks that required some specialized knowledge – no matter how slight – for example on June 14 back on the plains, shortly after Thornton had joined up with Dunbar's company. A messenger from one of the forward companies out of Independence was sent back looking for someone who might amputate the leg of a seven-year-old boy, Enoch Garrison, whose leg had been crushed by the wheels, after falling off the tongue of a wagon. Another chronicler, Edwin Bryant, who was known to have had some medical training, was summoned to perform the amputation, as was lawyer Thornton, who had learned some medicine as part of his legal studies.[3]

According to Bryant, the child had complained to his mother the night before about "feeling worms crawling" in his injured leg. At first his mother dismissed this as being absurd, but upon examining the leg it was discovered that gangrene had set in, and the child's limb was "swarming with maggots." Unfortunately the child did not survive such a major operation performed on the trail with primitive instruments without benefit of any anesthetic (ether gas was first used in Boston Hospital in 1842). Thornton himself admitted to having turned away several times from the gruesome "spectacle," which took nearly two hours. Finally the boy, having endured much pain during the operation, was released from his misery. In passing on he said goodbye to his tearful mother, and told her that he "was going to heaven."

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The three-week journey from Ft. Laramie through South Pass on July 18, Thornton reported as "uneventful." There was the usual shifting of company allegiances, with three families who had left Dunbar's company remaining

behind with the Californians as they moved out on June 30. Then on July 4 they all fired their guns in celebration, and shared some libations brought by James Reed, whose Donner party was still traveling in company with ex-Gov. Boggs.

On July 6 they forded the North Platte, and the next day camped with four other companies. This part of the trip has been excessively dusty, and very hard on their working cattle. Capt. Rice Dunbar had to abandon one of his oxen that had "sank down" from exhaustion. On July 9 they camped within a mile of Independence Rock, less than a week behind this milestone "schedule," and on July 11 they finally reached the "Sweet Water" tributary of the Platte, which they followed until July 18.

The 120-mile ascent through Devil's Gate and up the Rocky Mountains to South Pass from Independence Rock, had been so gradual that it was hard to fix the summit. Even so, in journeying through the pass Thornton saw many oxen that had died from over-exertion -- combined perhaps with the rarefied air at this nearly one-and-one-half-mile-high elevation of the continental "Rockies." Thornton's own ox Brady was among those that had dropped down on the road and had to be taken off the yoke, and left by the wayside to die. Feeling remorseful for his "faithful ox," Thornton left the company the next day to return to where they had left him to see "if poor old Brady still lived, and if possible, to provide for him a little grass and water, and do whatever else humanity, or a strong attachment to a faithful ox, might suggest." "But the poor fellow was dead, and the wolves had already commenced devouring him."

Thornton returned to his company later in the day, and they all encamped on the Little Sandy River, the first of the "western-flowing" rivers eventually discharging itself into the Colorado. They had finally crossed the Continental Divide through South Pass, and were now in the Oregon Territory where the rivers all flowed westerly. At this July 19th encampment, Thornton was joined by a number of Oregon and California emigrants -- among them were the companies of "West, Crabtree, Campbell, Boggs, Donners, and Dunbar," the latter of which being the company in which the James Smith party had traveled since their Independence, Missouri, departure.

THORNTON: I had, at one time or another, become acquainted with all of these persons in those companies, and had traveled with them from [the beginning] … until subsequent divisions and subdivisions had separated us. We had often, since our various separations, passed and repassed each other upon the road, and had frequently encamped together by the same water and grass, as we did now.

Thornton went on to mention nostalgically, that these travelers had been so close throughout the trip that "the particular history of my own journey was the general history of theirs."

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Nearly one month earlier, back on June 27, some ten miles before reaching Ft. Laramie, chronicler Thornton had mentioned passing a small party traveling eastward, which he dismissed as presenting a "woebegone appearance." Thornton was apparently unaware that this small eastbound-party was led by the renowned mountain man, **James Clyman,** who had recently accompanied Lansford W. Hastings out from California. Clyman's party was continuing on their way eastward, returning to Missouri. As chroniclers Thornton and others had commented, Clyman expressed great dissatisfaction with the country he had just left. Furthermore, having just accompanied Hastings eastward over most of the latter's new California route south of Great Salt Lake, Clyman was unconvinced that the new route Hastings was promoting was shorter or better than the regular California Trail through Ft. Hall.[4]

On what turned out to be the fateful evening of June 27, Clyman had met until a late hour with several prominent emigrants who Thornton had just described as traveling closely together "throughout the trip." These included ex-Gov. Boggs and the leaders of the Donner party, all of whom were headed for California. Coincidentally, Clyman had served in the same company with one of the Donner party leaders, James Reed, during the Black Hawk war of 1832 in Illinois. In speaking of the proposed new Hastings' Cut-off, Clyman told his ex-army buddy Reed "about the great desert and the roughness of the sierras and that a straight route might turn out to be impractical." Finally, Clyman cautioned Reed "to take the regular wagon track and never leave it. It is barely possible to get through if you follow it and it may be impossible if you don't."[5]

The Donner party had been fairly warned by this old army friend of Reed's who was entirely familiar with not only the territory but also with this particular route, but they knew better which route they wanted to follow. In words that have echoed through history, Reed responded**,** "there is a nigher route and it is of no use to take such a roundabout course."

This "nigher" ("nearer" or "shorter") route was the new Hastings' Cut-off, which Reed and his Donner party brethren would soon set out to follow, on their own appointment with destiny.

Arising the morning of July 20, the reason for Thornton's earlier nostalgia became abundantly clear. He and his many traveling companions had reached a point of decision, where the emigrants would choose between either continuing southwesterly on to Ft. Hall by way of the "regular" route through Ft. Bridger, or turning off to the right onto the shorter Greenwood Cut-off, which provided a more direct route to the same eventual Ft. Hall destination.

THORNTON: … the greater number of the Californians, and especially the companies in which George Donner, Jacob Donner, James F. Reed, and William H. Eddy, … families traveled … here turned to the left, for the purpose of going on by the way of Ft. [Bridger], to meet Lansford W. Hastings …

The Californians were generally much elated, and in high spirits with the prospect of a better and nearer road to the country of their destination. Mrs. George Donner was, however, an exception. She was gloomy, sad, and dispirited, in view of the fact, that her husband and others could think for a moment of leaving the old road, and confide in the statement of a man of whom they knew nothing, but who was probably some selfish adventurer.

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After this parting, the Oregon-bound emigrants -- ex-Gov. Boggs and Judge Morin, having been persuaded by Clyman against going to California, now among them -- resumed their journey, embarking on a challenging new "short-cut" themselves. The old route to Ft. Bridger taken by the Donner party was the first leg of the Oregon Trail just past the Continental Divide and therefore inside the Oregon Territory. It eventually led to Ft. Hall, which was located in what is present-day eastern Idaho. This "regular" route went southwesterly down the Little Sandy to Ft. Bridger, located in the extreme southwestern corner of today's Wyoming, and then doubled back northwesterly toward Ft. Hall. From where they were, the regular route formed an almost perfect "V," with Ft. Bridger at the point and Ft. Hall at the top of the "V's" left stem (see map).

This new route proceeded straight across the top of the two stems of the "V," more-or-less directly westward toward Ft. Hall. It was the same route several 1845 companies had taken with good results the year before, but had been rejected by the more "prudent" 1846 Simpson company traveling ahead of them. These new "shortcuts" all had some tradeoffs it seemed, and the main drawback to this one was that it involved a long stretch between the Big Sandy and the Green Rivers where there was no wood for fires, and even more importantly it had a scarcity of water and grass for the animals.

Upon the Donner party's departure for Ft. Bridger at the Little Sandy, the remainder of those traveling along with Thornton continued due west and camped that night on the Big Sandy River. There the emigrants spent an extra day revitalizing their work oxen, and preparing themselves for the forty-mile dry stretch they would undertake the next day. They awakened early the morning of July 22, and started out on Greenwood's Cut-off with their kegs of water full, and traveled all day through a barren desert devoid of any vegetation. Thornton told of parceling water out to his oxen in quart jars, giving more to the animals that seemed to be suffering most.

Twenty miles later, the emigrants encamped around sunset, and caught a few hours of badly needed sleep for themselves and their oxen. They awakened again at 2:30 in the morning of July 23, ate a hasty breakfast, and at 4:00 a. m. started out once again on the last half of the shortcut. After traveling for nearly twelve hours, they finally reached the Green River at 3:30 p.m., where they

found several other companies already encamped.

These last fifty miles had been the worst stretch yet, and the forty miles without water had taken its toll on the oxen. But Greenwood‘s shortcut *had* saved several days of valuable travel time. The emigrants traveling with Thornton had gained maybe three or four days on other Oregon-bound companies which had stuck to the regular route through Ft. Bridger on their way to Ft. Hall.

Having made it safely over Greenwood’s Cut-off, on July 24 Thornton rejoined his former companions, again teamed up with ex-Gov. Boggs, all of whom were now all going to Oregon as Thornton had been from the beginning. On the evening of Saturday, July 25, they encamped about three miles below where they stayed when they first reached the Green River, Thornton's former traveling companions in the Boone party remaining behind.

The next day they resumed their journey, the scholarly Thornton for the first time learning how to drive his own ox team. Thornton’s new traveling companions overtook the Rice Dunbar company ahead of them at noon on July 28, when the latter stopped to bury a traveling companion, Margaret Campbell. At sunrise James Campbell’s wife had finally succumbed to a protracted illness, leaving her husband with six young children to care for, ages three to thirteen. Those who could leave their teams joined in the solemn procession. Thornton reflected that when he saw “the stricken survivor turn away from the lowly bed of that dead wife, to resume the toil of his yet long, arduous, and perilous journey, he seemed bowed down by the sorrows that pressed upon his heart.”

That night the company in which Thornton was traveling camped upon the Bear River, the major source of the Great Salt Lake, and on Sunday, August 2, they “nooned” on a small tributary. A day later they stayed at what he called a “most remarkable group of soda springs.” Boggs’ company continued traveling northward, and on August 4 crossed into the valley of the Portneaf River. Another two days brought them within six miles of Ft. Hall on August 6, which they reached at noon the following day. The Dunbar company remained in close proximity to Thornton, arriving at Ft. Hall right behind them, probably on August 8, 1846 – a date that would later prove to be fortuitous.

The large party of our James Smith ancestors, still traveling with Capt. Rice Dunbar as they had all the way from Missouri, had finally arrived at Ft. Hall. Their arrival was a good ten days after our Absalom Smith ancestors had already departed that place with the Simpson company, following the “regular” route from the fort which eventually led down to The Dalles of the Columbia River. However, on the very day the Dunbar company reached Ft. Hall, a wholly unexpected event would occur which would turn this company with our James Smith ancestors away from following the path of our Absalom Smith ancestors down the well-established regular route to The Dalles, and send them off in an entirely different – and as yet untried -- new direction!