Chapter Six
Oregon City

"Upwards of fifty deaths on the new route" -- measured in terms of death toll alone, this first attempt at finding a suitable new wagon route into the Willamette Valley had resulted in being the worst tragedy in annals of the entire western migration.

Seven of the nine Parker children eventually recovered -- to be raised without benefit of their now deceased mother. But one daughter nearly drowned when she was tossed out of the canoe in which she was riding down the ricer from The Dalles, by a sudden whirlpool. "Luckily her full skirt mushroomed out and kept her afloat the few minutes it took her brother to rescue her."[1]

There were others who were most fortunate to have barely survived the travails of the Meek Cut-off, who did not fare nearly so well on the treacherous Columbia River itself. Most of these river deaths should probably be attributed directly to the hazards of this last and most difficult phase of the trail to Oregon. But many could very well have been caused indirectly by the weakened condition of virtually all those who had survived Meek's new route.

Alfred Moore, husband of Elizabeth and father of four youngsters, drowned in the Columbia October 22 while heroically trying to save his family. He got entangled in the ropes he was using to pull his family's raft to shore. Patriarch Naham King's 32-year-old son, John King, his wife Susan and two of their three young children, died rafting down the Columbia on October 26. Only their 5-year-old son Luther survived. Baby Elisha Hall, son of James and Cynthia, drowned October 29. And there were others.[2]

Parties of men felled nearby trees for logs to build rafts used to take the wagons and supplies with women and children down the Columbia to the Cascades. From that point the mud was so deep the teams got mired as they slowly trudged along. So they had to improve a road enough to get the wagons to a landing at the foot of the Cascades, where the teams were unhitched and all carried by company barge to Linnton.

"By the last of October news of the emigrants' plight echoed widely through the valley and supplies were gathered for their relief. Capt. Cook's newly launched 25 ton sloop `Callapooia' transported the supplies from Oregon City to the Cascades."[3] Some people took the Callapooia from the foot of the rapids downriver to Oregon City. Others took crafts supplied by Hudson's Bay Company to Ft. Vancouver, where they were fed and then taken by small boat to Linnton. Some were too sick with fever stayed to be cured by the Company doctor. Linnton (Lynnton, Linton, or Lynton) was the first jumping-off place on the trail which was located on the west side of the Willamette, nearere where it

empties into the Columbia. This was just south of Sauvie Island and across from what is now northeast Portland. It was the "gateway" to territory on the west side of the Willamette River, the present-day counties of Washington, Yamhill, Polk, and Benton, etc.

PARKER: When I come to the Cascade falls I had to make a portage of 3 miles. I put my sick girl in a blanket and packed her and onely rested once that day. We maid the portige with the help of my fore indiens and my oldest boy and girl had never been sick one minet on the Road. on the 8[th of November] I landed at oregon City, wet, hungry and all most wore out with my family most all sick. The 3 youngest soon got well but it was 19 days after I landed till my oldest stood along harty and well now.

They came by boat, canoe, and makeshift raft, with or without their wagons and supplies and equipment, with some others walking along carrying their belongings. On October 22, 1845, Malinda Crabtree, age thirty-seven, even gave birth to twins while coming across the Columbia River on a raft!

The huge increase in the number of wagoneers in 1845 put a tremendous strain on the limited facilities available for getting the travelers and their supplies and equipment downstream and into the Willamette Valley. This caused intolerably long waits that further exacerbated the crowded situation, and the demand for supplies and transportation facilities. In some places it was chaotic. However, the valley residents were more than generous in responding to the plight of these new settlers, with food, shelter, and employment at all kinds in tasks needed to get along at least through the first winter.

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Although Field's daily report was not kept during the final weeks of the journey, the later recollections of the partly-delirious James Field which were reported in the Willamette Farmer at the close of the Field diary, does provide a very complete explanation of his subsequent movements. Even in his only partial consciousness, Field remained the "ever-mindful" observer of this trail experience:

This ends the journal, and we publish below a letter from Mr. Field in regard to the latter part of the journey. Ed Farmer:

Port Chester, N. Y., June 3, 1879:

FIELD: FRIEND CLARKE: Through the kindness of my old friend, R. Weeks, of Portland, I am in receipt of three numbers of your paper, containing installments of my diary kept while crossing the plains in '45, with a request that I may complete it from memory. This is impossible for me to do, as it was cut short by my illness with camp fever, which destroyed all memory of what transpired during the remainder of the journey.

I have an indistinct recollection of crossing the Deschutes river in a wagon body caulked tight, and drawn back and forth by ropes, of being carried and laid upon a bed among the rocks that lined the river-banks where we crossed, and of arriving at The Dalles so helpless that it was necessary to lift me out of and into the wagon like a baby.

Then I remember going down the Cascades in a boat such as the Hudson Bay Co. then used on the river, of walking and crawling past the first steep rapid, then getting into a canoe with some Indians and running the remainder of the rapids to the landing place of the old Callapooia, Capt. Cook owner and master; then of sailing down the Columbia and up the Willamette to Linton, a place on the west bank of the river below Portland, and then having the only wagon-road to the Tualatin plains below Oregon City, from the river. From Linton to Oregon City I was a fellow passenger with old Mr. Fleming, the pioneer printer, so long connected with the press at that place, and I think it was late in November when we arrived there.

Field was apparently accompanied on this last leg of the journey by John Fleming, who was an older man who had traveled alone in Tetherow's company on the Meek Cutoff. The comments by Field regarding the final phase of the journey suggest what may have happened to him and perhaps even the Riggs party beyond The Dalles, until they arrived at their eventual home probably in late November. The semi-conscious Field went by Hudson’s Bay Company boat from the mission to the rapids, walked and crawled overland past the Cascades, was then among those transported back down the Columbia in Capt. Cook's Callapooia, and finally carried up the Willamette first to Linnton, and then to Oregon City.

Field's next comment about the boat ride between Linnton and Oregon City in which he was traveling with John Fleming, suggests that he traveled with the Riggs family as far as Linnton. At least a part of the Riggs' family probably sailed on the Callapooia to Linnton -- the place "having the only wagon-road to the Tualatin plains below Oregon City," as Field points out. Then, the remaining members of the Riggs family may have departed there to meet the Riggs' wagon drivers, attempting to salvage whatever of their wagons and equipment they could, perhaps coming by raft to Linnton. At that point the entire family may have reassembled, and continued their journey on into the valley on the west side of the river where they eventually settled. Of course, this is only speculation.

In any event, the Riggs family had probably made prior arrangements for the single man John Fleming to escort their semi-delirious ad hoc "family member" -- driver James Field -- on into Oregon City, where he could be properly cared for -- this while the rest of the Riggs party probably struck off on the Old Trappers' Trail into the Willamette Valley, to which Linnton on the west side of the Willamette was the "gateway."

We do know that fortunately, the otherwise young and vigorous twenty-two-year-old Field eventually recovered from his bout with camp fever, and that

he maintained his close relationship with the Riggs family during the next several years. He visited them on at least two occasions when Field returned to Oregon from visiting his family in New York, and entrusted the Riggs' to care for his precious daily journal of the journey.

As for the Riggs family, its members all escaped the Meek Cut-off disaster with their lives intact. Although there is no record of their movements during those last days en route, the words of William Goulder provide insight into what happened to another prominent family and their young teamsters from this point. As a young man of twenty-four, Goulder had traveled with the family of 61-year-old Capt. Nicholas Ownbey in the lead company as one of his drivers, from which Ownbey was then separating on the Tualatin Plains, fourteen miles over the Tualatin Mountains from Linnton. There are so many similarities between the circumstances of these two captains Ownbey and Riggs, whose two companies traveled so closely together over the entire journey, that the sentiment here expresses what may very well have been the sentiment between J. B. Riggs and his one teamster, had James Field yet gained consciousness and been separated from Capt. Riggs in like manner:

GOULDER: The men in our company were not all heads of families, or members of any of the families with whom we had so long journeyed. Many of us were young men, without relatives that we knew of anywhere west of the Alleghanies. We had traveled with the families by virtue of an agreement to stay with the immigration, and to help in all the tasks that came to hand, and to share with the families with whom we traveled in all that fortune, good or bad, might have in store for all. This agreement, so far as I know, was faithfully lived up to by all parties concerned.

The man with whom I traveled was a typical old frontier Missourian named Nicholas Ownbey. He had a large family of sons and daughters, large herds of horses and cattle, and traveled with four well-equipped and well-provisioned wagons. During the long and trying journey of seven months he had uniformly treated the young strangers traveling with him as if they had been his own sons. He was of rough demeanor, but a real gem, for all that, and a man always ready and full of resources for every emergency.

On the morning that we broke camp in Tualatin Plains, he said to us "Well boys, I'm going away up into Polk County, wherever that may be, to see what I can find."[4]