Chapter Seven
Barlow & Palmer

The disaster known as the Meek Cut-off had extracted its awesome toll on those unwary emigrants who had chosen it. But this was not the end of the story of the 1845 migration. These emigrants from the Meek Cut-off would exert their influence on other 1845 emigrants who had taken the regular route, as they arrived at The Dalles of the Columbia, waiting for the boats that would carry them downstream through the rapids. The effects of Stephen Meek's failed enterprise would provoke yet another attempt at finding a new route designed specifically to bring emigrants over the Cascade Mountain barrier.

The founders of the new route that would come to be known as the "Barlow Road" had not set out to discover a new extension of the Oregon Trail. But as was the case with Stephen Meek and his new cut-off, necessity proved to again be the mother of discovery. Steven Meek's inspiration had apparently derived solely from his own personal desire to create for himself a means of employment. With Barlow Road discovers Sam Barlow and Joel Palmer, their motivation came from what drove every emigrant who embarked on the Oregon Trail journey -- their desire to keep their wagons moving onward toward their eventual destination.

It was the failure of Stephen Meek's selfishly motivated new route that provided the spark that had ignited Barlow and Palmer's unselfish attempt at discovering a new overland route for bringing their wagons into the Willamette Valley.

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Fifty-year-old **Sam Barlow** and the company he led had traveled near the rear of the 1845 migration. He was among those who had religiously followed the "regular" Oregon Trail route all the way through from Independence in that year, avoiding even the Greenwood Cut-off. This made Barlow among the last travelers to reach The Dalles of the Columbia, not arriving there until late September, 1845.

When many of those traveling in Sam Barlow's company had turned off for California just past Ft. Hall, Barlow himself had decided to continue on to Oregon. He had also unintentionally avoided following Stephen Meek's "shorter" road into the Willamette Valley through Central Oregon, by virtue of his probably having arrived too late to have even heard about it. Instead, Barlow had stayed on the "regular" route that led northwestwardly through to the Columbia River, and then westerly along the river and into The Dalles.

It was there at The Dalles that Barlow found himself at a point of decision, when the lack of an adequate number of boats forced him to wait for the dubious "privilege" of attempting the last leg of the dangerous journey down that treacherous river. Sam Barlow did not set out to discover a wagon route over the Cascade Mountains and into the valley settlements. But ironically the utter failure of the Meek Cut-off had set the stage for Barlow's interest in finding *any* suitable alternative "overland" wagon route that would get him there.

It was here that Barlow recalled in crossing over the Blue Mountains in northeast Oregon, he had seen what appeared to be a "sink" in the Cascade Mountains which he thought might admit wagons over that otherwise formidable range. Despite having been told that it was impossible to take wagons around the southern (inland) face of Mt. Hood, Barlow resolved to see if he could possibly find there a new, entirely "overland" wagon route into the Willamette Valley. So after conducting a preliminary survey, on Sept. 24th -- the same fateful day 1845 chronicler James Field had been rendered unconscious from camp fever on the Meek Cut-off -- Barlow headed southward from The Dalles with seven wagons, on a new journey of discovery.[1]

Joel Palmer, age forty-four, had left his family in Indiana on April 16th, 1845, for the purpose of scouting out the northwest, and determining whether he wanted to make his family's future home in Oregon. He and his traveling companion, Spencer Buckley, arrived at Independence, Missouri, after the 1845 wagon train had already departed. However, it is known from the detailed daily journey Palmer kept, that he caught up with the other wagoners in time to join them on the migration. Eventually Palmer found himself leading a small company of thirty wagons, traveling near the tail end of the large 1845 wagon train.

Instead of risking the new Greenwood Cut-off that Capt. J. B. Riggs and his company took after crossing over the Continental Divide, like Sam Barlow before him, the prudent Palmer led this company down the longer but better-established regular route through Ft. Bridger. He then continued on through Ft. Hall, following the Snake River across southern Idaho, and later arrived at Ft. Boise on September 2, ten days after Capt. Riggs and his company had arrived there.

Fifteen miles north of Ft. Boise, where Capt. Riggs had turned left to follow Stephen Meek on his new route through Central Oregon, Palmer told of meeting Dr. Elijah White from the 1842 migration, who was on his way back to the states. Palmer mentioned nothing about discussing with White the possibility of locating yet another route into the Willamette Valley through Central Oregon for which White had been searching. However, Palmer did say he had inquired about the feasibility of Meek's route both at Ft. Hall and at Ft. Boise, and said he was advised that it was unlikely that teams could get through.

So Palmer's company instead of turning east, wisely continued on northward from Ft. Boise, again following the tried-and-true “regular” Oregon Trail up Burnt River through mountainous country, past what Palmer called the most difficult part of the journey since he started. Despite the difficulties, the company was able to make at least twelve miles per day, arriving at Powder River after traveling one week from Boise. There on Sept 10th, they told of meeting a friendly Cayuse chief, and bartering for cattle.

They then pushed onward into the Grand Round country, ascending the mountains over a road Palmer described as “steep and precipitous.” Crossing over the main ridge of the Blue Mountains, they had a fine view of Mt. Hood, 150 miles distant looking westerly. Then descending down the mountains they reached the Umatilla River where the company was rejoined by some emigrants who, to get supplies, had detoured up to the Whitman Mission at Waiilaptu – “place of rye grass” -- just inside the present-day state of Washington seven miles west of Walla Walla. These emigrants were accompanied by Dr. & Mrs. Marcus Whitman, who Palmer recalled spent the day telling the travelers of the ten years they had lived in the area.

First established in 1836 by Whitman and Henry Spalding, Whitman Mission had been an important resupplying point on earlier trail migrations, but starting in 1845 it was bypassed in favor of a more direct route. These Presbyterian missionaries had been the first to bring covered wagons over the Oregon Trail in a small expedition of 1836, and their wives Narcissa Whitman and Eliza Spalding had the distinction of being the first white women to travel into the Oregon Territory.

“Joel Palmer recalled his conversation with Dr. Whitman in which the Doctor explained the difficulties in descending the Columbia River and getting the stock” into the Willamette Valley. Whitman spoke of a trail from The Dalles to Oregon City, going from the White River tributary of the Deschutes, over the south face of Mt. Hood, until it met the Clackamus River on the other side. “Indians traveled it with ponies and sometimes packhorses and he believed a wagon road could be made through there. Palmer asked if they could not leave the trail above The Dalles and strike across to the Deschutes. Dr. Whitman said they could if they were able to build their road as they went. Then the Doctor drew a map of the country for Palmer, who said ‘I resolved in my own mind that we could make the effort.’”[2]

In the morning of Sept. 16, Palmer and his company took up the march again, down the Umatilla River, following generally what is today Interstate 84, the Old Oregon Trail Highway. Along the way, the emigrants were visited by Walla Walla Indians, who proved to be friendly in bringing them potatoes and venison to trade mainly for clothing. On Sept 21st they reached the Columbia River, and followed it westward past where the John Day and then the Deschutes Rivers empty into it. On Sept 29th they finally reached the mission at The Dalles of the Columbia, the place beyond which no wagons had ever gone "overland"

before. Here, they found a huge crowd of sixty families waiting for passage down the river by two small boats that went only as far as the cascade falls.

On the last day of September, Palmer recalled: “This day we intended to make arrangements for our passage down the river, but we found upon inquiry, that the two boats spoken of were engaged for at least ten days, and their charges were exorbitant.” Driven by necessity, they began inquiring about the feasibility of going over the mountains, and learned that Sam Barlow was already in the mountains attempting to find such a passage.

Again, neither Sam Barlow nor Joel Palmer had intended to go looking for a new “wagon” route over the Cascades. Both men were fully prepared to take the dangerous watery route down the treacherous Columbia River and into the valley. But necessity had intervened, and had caused them to both seek out an alternate “overland” route around the “south” face of Mt. Hood. This route over the Oregon’s tallest mountain had been used by the Indians for their ponies and packhorses, but had only been suggested as a possibility for wagons. But both Barlow and Palmer experienced first hand just how insufficient was the existing transportation down the Columbia River at the time. They both knew how important was the need for finding a suitable "overland" route for bringing wagons over the Cascade Mountains and into the valley – not necessarily for future travelers into the valley – but for themselves and their traveling companions – right then, in early October of 1845. And with winter coming they were running out of time.

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Joel Palmer was able to convince fifteen men with twenty-three wagons to accompany him on his journey of discovery over the Cascade Mountains. Late on October 1 they started into the mountains, and crossed Tygh Creek, the same creek which five miles east flows into the Deschutes River by way of the White River, just a ways upstream from where Meek's companies would be starting across the mighty river the very next day.

Here Palmer's party came upon the seven wagons of Barlow's party and camped overnight, making a total of thirty wagons searching for this new route. After two days of searching up the White River and into the mountains to the west, they came back to camp, and found Barlow had returned with a small party that had been searching in the same general area. They had gone to within twelve to fifteen miles of Mt. Hood, and told of a bluff where they supposed to have seen the Willamette valley. The party had returned on a trail the Indians said continued over Mt. Hood and on down to Oregon City.

Their combined search party now decided to send some men ahead to drive the loose cattle over this trail and into the settlements, and then return with provisions for the main body. Another small party was dispatched back to The

Dalles, as provisions were so low there was immediate need. Palmer and Barlow would go on ahead with Harrison Locke to search for the pass, while the others remained with the wagons and would work on advancing the road behind them.

On October 11 the searchers left on foot, intending to go far enough to see where a road for wagons might actually go. They pushed their way through "heavy timber and brush so thick it was almost impossible to get through it." Finally coming upon Mt. Hood before them for the first time, Palmer says with obvious admiration, "I have never seen a sight so nobly grand. We had previously seen only the top of it, but now we had a view of the whole mountain. No pen can give an adequate description of the scene."[3]

Onward past a deep ravine, then ascending the mountain Palmer's two friends began to lag behind, but he continued on through the snow and ice. “My moccasins were worn out, and the soles of my feet exposed to the snow...,” but looking out over the country south, Palmer saw the Big Sandy and Clackamas Rivers running down to where they emptied into the Willamette. He could see a low gap in the mountains, and said he “was fully of the opinion that we could find a passage through.”[4]

The three men had only one biscuit each to eat, so they headed back for camp, gathering berries as they descended down the mountain. They finally arrived at the camp at 11 p.m., and Palmer admits “although not often tired, I was willing to acknowledge that I was near being so. I certainly was hungry....”[5]

Palmer set out on October 13 for just one more trip, to view out the road. After only two days he observed that “[t]he weather, which had been entirely clear for months, had through the night began to cloud up; and in the morning the birds, squirrels, and every thing around seemed to indicate the approach of a storm.” The explorers realized the labor needed to clear a road though the mountains was “greater than we could possibly bestow upon it before the rainy season.”[6] And the company waiting behind them was near starvation.

At this point Palmer recalled, “as I had been very active in inducing others to embark in the enterprise, my conscience would not allow me to go on and thus endanger so many families. But to go back, and state to them the difficulties to be encountered, and the necessity of taking some other course, seemed to be my duty. I therefore resolved to return, and recommend selecting some suitable place, for a permanent camp, build a cabin, put in such effects as we could not pack out, and leave our wagons and effects in the charge of some persons until we could return the next season, unencumbered with our families and cattle and finish the road….”[7]

It was here the founders made the one crucial decision that altered forever what quite easily could have turned this route into a road of great adversity. Instead of pressing ahead with their wagons and equipment, the route’s co-founders decided to wait through the oncoming winter, until a proper wagon road could be provided.

On October 15 the search party finally returned to camp, and agreed to Palmer's proposal. Barlow and William Rector went ahead to see if they could walk the proposed wagon road on down into Oregon City. Arrangements were made to send men ahead into the settlements for provisions, and a cabin was built on Barlow Creek at a place they named “Ft. Deposit.” There, wagons and equipment were left to be guarded through the winter. They would not actually attempt to bring wagons over this potential new route until the next year.

By November 1, 1845, exactly one month after Palmer had started out, everyone but the guards they left behind had walked or ridden on into Oregon City safely, with what belongings they could pack out without their wagons. Searching for this new road had been anything been easy. Some of them had experienced great hardship, freezing temperatures, and near starvation. But the emigrants themselves did get through safely to the other side of the Cascades.

As with the Meek Cut-off, Sam Barlow and Joel Palmer’s parties were unsuccessful in bringing their wagons across the Cascades in the year of 1845. But at least they had located the path for a potential new wagon route over the mountains that were used by those emigrants traveling with them to reach the valley -- albeit *without* their wagons and equipment. Next spring, after the winter snows had receded, the emigrants could return to Ft. Deposit and retrieve the belongings they had stashed there.

Unlike the Meek Cut-off, no one suffered great loss of property or life in making this latest effort at bringing wagons into the Willamette Valley. And the Barlow Road would not be the last of the inspirational attempts at discovering such a route over the mountains. Despite these two failed attempts in 1845, the search for a suitable overland wagon route was not yet over.