Chapter Nine
California Trail

In researching the trail I was often reminded of how truly small the young world of the western United States actually was back in the mid-1800s – not in the size of these vast wide-open western spaces certainly -- but measured solely by the number of inhabitants. I was frequently reminded of this curious fact by the numerous "coincidences" where someone would run into someone else at some remote location somewhere out in that vast wilderness, and the two parties would recognize each other as having known one another back somewhere else in another place and time.

Such was the case with Absalom Smith's brother-in-law John M. Wilson meeting his old trapper friend Pegleg Smith out near Smith River. There was also the time when emigrant leader James Reed met up with his old Army buddy mountaineer James Clyman right before Reed's Donner party voted to follow Lansford Hasting's new cut-off, which Clyman had warned his former comrade-in-arms against taking – to no avail. These two coincidental meetings come readily to mind.

There were other chance meetings too numerous to recall here, but they were always striking when they did occur. One such meeting that stands out in my own mind head and shoulders above all others, occurred when our James Smith ancestors arrived at Ft. Hall.

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Traveling up the Humboldt River from the west on horseback, South Road exploring party leader Jesse Applegate arrived at Ft. Hall on August 8, 1846. This was most likely the exact same day the large party of our James Smith ancestors arrived at that same place, traveling in Rice Dunbar's company coming from the opposite direction (see Chapter 2). It was as if fate had purposely arranged this meeting in the middle of nowhere at that exact time and place -- a remote fort in the wilderness halfway between "civilization" and the Oregon settlements.

The Smith and Long families had been neighbors of the Applegate brothers in St. Clair County, Missouri, where they had all lived nearby one another in the Osage River Valley. These families had even resided in the same township, and had been counted on adjacent pages of the 1840 U. S. Census. These former close neighbors had not seen Jesse Applegate since he and his two brothers Lindsay and Charles had pulled up stakes three years earlier, and left with their families on the first large wagon train to Oregon, back in 1843. "It was like meeting a friend," as chronicler John McBride had

described his party's encountering Lansford Hastings only a month earlier at the Continental Divide.[1]

What's more, this old "friend," who the Smiths knew to be a professional land surveyor, brought wonderful news about his exploring party having just discovered a shorter and better route into the valley. Applegate told them that his new "southern route" would not only eliminate the hazardous trip down the treacherous Columbia River rapids at the end of the old route, it would also enable the immigrants to bring their wagons and belongings safely over the Cascade Mountains and into the valley by the first of October, in plenty of time to "build a cabin and sow wheat before the rainy season." Applegate's new route was perfect in nearly every respect, and here before them was the answer to their prayers. It looked like the gods who had led them this far along the trail with no missteps were still smiling down on them, and had now taken a hand in guiding them safely on into the settlements. It must have seemed to the James Smith party as though this marvelous news brought by their old friend and neighbor Jesse Applegate, was almost too good to be true.

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The second South Road exploring party had taken a full month to discover the vital connecting link that made this new Southern Route possible. During this search their stock of provisions had run dangerously low. They then decided to dispatch a small party to ride on ahead to Ft. Hall on their groups' strongest horses, where they could replenish their supplies. On July 25 explorers Jesse Applegate, David Goff, Black Harris, John Owens and Henry Boygus departed, while the remaining ten explorers stayed behind to proceed at a more leisurely pace and meet up with the advance party at Thousand Springs on the latter's return from Ft. Hall.

Replenishing supplies was not the sole mission of this advance party, however. According to Levi Scott, before the Applegate party departed for Ft. Hall, the explorers "made a careful estimate of how much work it would require to open a road …" and concluded it would take "thirty" hands. Scott was appointed "to act as a guide to the emigrants," – those who chose to travel this new route -- and he selected explorer William Parker to assist him. Jesse Applegate and the others then left for Ft. Hall with a written estimate of the road-building requirement. "It was distinctly and emphatically understood," Scott insisted, that if Applegate was not able to raise the required thirty men, then he would not advise the emigrants to embark on this untried new route.[2]

Jesse Applegate, having departed the main body of explorers for Ft. Hall on July 25, wrote in a letter to his brother Lisbon in Missouri about having met Larkin Stanley of the Craig & Stanley party which was traveling down the California Trail at the forefront of the entire 1846 wagon train, on its way to

California. Stanley must have also known the Applegates in Missouri, as he told Jesse his brother would be coming to Oregon the next year. According to chronicler William E, Taylor, this meeting was in the morning of August 3, in Thousand Springs Valley, probably near the headwater of the Humboldt River at Bishop Creek. This was a distance of over 225 miles from the turnoff to the new South Road, a distance Jesse Applegate's party had covered in only nine days, averaging a respectable 25-plus miles-per-day on horseback.[3]

It was at this meeting that Jesse Applegate's party must have "heard" tell that emigrant Medders Vanderpool "was leading a company down the Snake River" -- following the "regular northern route" to Oregon. Vanderpool was an old trapper and trader friend of Black Harris, so explorers Harris and David Goff quickly left the other three explorers and "went down Goose Creek and met the emigrants at the mouth of that stream," where it empties into the Snake. To get there while Vanderpool's company was "encamped on the fifth day of August," these two explorers had to have covered the nearly 100 miles to the "mouth" of Goose Creek, in less than three days – riding on horseback at a very good clip of over thirty-miles-per day. Scott's recollection tells us that this Oregon-bound Vanderpool company was on the regular route to Oregon at the "mouth" of Goose Creek, not on the California Trail of which "upper" Goose Creek is a part, as historian Dale Morgan had suggested previously.[4]

In the meantime, Jesse Applegate had continued on toward Ft. Hall with the two remaining explorer companions, Owens and Boygus. These three followed the established route down upper Goose Creek and then across to Raft River, until they arrived the morning of August 6 where that river joins the Snake. The following day, Jesse Applegate first met a small emigrant company led by Harrison Linville, and convinced them of the virtues of his new route. Linville's company thus became the first one to actually turn onto the new road from its "origin," beginning at the "forks" of the two routes, where the California Trail diverged from the Oregon Trail. Part of Jesse Applegate's appeal probably included the fact that Black Harris had been dispatched to also bring Harris' old friend Medders Vanderpool onto the new route, as Linville's sister Margaret was married to Vanderpool, and their parents were traveling with her brother Harrison Linville.

Jesse Applegate then proceeded hastily on to Ft. Hall, where he arrived on August 8, just in time to meet the first of the rest of the emigrants who had departed from Independence. Just before reaching the fort, Applegate met up with the party of ex-Gov. Boggs in which Thornton was traveling. Applegate had been a member of the Missouri legislature when Boggs was governor of the state, and Boggs was persuaded onto the route by Applegate's glowing report. There were others as well who were similarly persuaded. According to Joseph Burke, an English Botanist who was visiting Ft. Hall, Jesse Applegate arrived there late that same evening, and "gave such a fine description of the country between the California line & the Walla Amett valley that I felt most anxious to

accompany him & his party on their return ….”[5]

In addition to Vanderpool, Boggs, and the Smith and Long families vouching for the good character of Jesse Applegate and the members of his South Road exploring party, there were other emigrants at Ft. Hall who had even closer connections to several of these earlier settlers. Explorer John Owens had accompanied Jesse Applegate to Ft. Hall to meet his own mother, who had come all the way out to join her family, traveling in a light two-horse carriage. Then too there was emigrant William J. Scott, whose own father Levi Scott would be guiding the emigrants over the new route, while William would join his brother, explorer John Scott, on the road-working party.[6]

These family ties and early acquaintances undoubtedly helped sway the other emigrants -- Thornton reported having relied greatly on Boggs’ assurances in making his decision. Additionally, Thornton wrote at great length about how Jesse Applegate had painted a glowing picture of his new route, giving a whole litany of road advantages. Not only was the route much shorter than the northern route, it was also better in all other respects: grass and water were plentiful...” and best of all it also “avoided the dangerous crossings of the Snake and Columbia rivers.”[7]

There *was* one small drawback: a short dry stretch of thirty miles through the Black Rock Desert at the beginning of the new cut-off. However, many of the emigrant teams had overcome earlier the forty-five miles of the waterless Greenwood Cut-off, and presumably this much shorter desert crossing would therefore be easier than that. And above all else, there was Jesse Applegate’s claim that they would reach the valley by the first of October. How could any emigrant resist this glowing offer?

Jesse Applegate was so enthusiastic over his explorers’ discovery, that he spared no effort in his recruiting emigrants on behalf of what he claimed was his superior new route. Chronicler Virgil Pringle’s party had apparently somehow passed by Applegate unnoticed on Pringle’s way out of Ft. Hall. So on August 9th Jesse Applegate must have ridden some 35 miles back down the trail, just in time to intercept the Pringle/Brown party only ten miles before they came to the “forks” in the two trails at Raft River. There Jesse convinced the Pringle party to turn onto the California Trail, which was the first leg of the Southern Route, despite the fact that Pringle must have know his brother-in-law Orus Brown had already set out on the regular route to the north – the same route guide Orus Brown had followed in 1843 on his initial trip into the valley settlements.

The Pringle/Brown party having been persuaded, Applegate must have then ridden all the way back to Ft. Hall to continue his recruiting efforts. Before finally departing Ft. Hall for Thousand Springs, Applegate posted an open letter to subsequent emigrants heralding the many advantages of his new Southern Route. He ended his August 10 waybill with the assurance that “this road has

been explored, and will be opened at the expense of the citizens of Oregon, and nothing whatever demanded of the emigrants." Applegate was so persuasive that apparently all the emigrants who arrived at Ft. Hall after Jesse got there ended up taking the Southern Route.[8]

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English botanist Joseph Burke reported accompanying Jesse Applegate on August 11 when he departed Ft. Hall, on his way to rejoin his exploring party comrades. In the meantime, Scott and this larger party of ten explorers had proceeded slowly toward Ft. Hall, "resting, and recruiting" themselves and their "jaded animals as much as possible." Finally, Scott and the others arrived at the head of the Humboldt, and went about sixty miles past there and on into the pre-arranged Thousand Springs Valley meeting place. Here they first met Harris & Goff, "accompanied by fourteen emigrant wagons" of Vanderpool's company, whom Harris had led "up Goose Creek till they struck the California trail and met us."[9]

The next day, seven more wagons arrived at the meeting place, which was probably the Harrison Linville's party diverted by Jesse Applegate. They brought with them a note to Scott from Applegate stating that he "was confident of getting the requisite number of hands to open the road," and suggesting that Scott get underway with the wagons that had already come to him. He told Scott that he would catch up to him in another two days "with the working party and the provisions" that Applegate had acquired at Ft. Hall. Accordingly, Scott and the other explorers then got underway back down the California Trail, with the new South Road emigrants following along.

Due to the lack of dates given by Scott with his recollection of events, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the emigrants traveling with him arrived and departed the Thousand Springs Valley, as it is not know for certain exactly where they camped. Lindsay Applegate said they arrived at Thousand Springs on August 5 and departed on August 11, but these dates appear to be at least a few days earlier than dates given by others for corresponding events. For example, Lindsay Applegate said his brother, Jesse arrived at the Thousand Springs meeting place on August 10, but Jesse himself posted a letter from Ft. Hall on that date, and Burke wrote they did not leave Ft. Hall until August 11.

When Jesse Applegate did finally overtake the Scott-led main party, Scott expressed grave concern in discovering that Jesse brought with him only five or six men. This was a far cry from the thirty road workers Scott had said the explorers had agreed would be needed to clear the road. Scott recalled that a total of only twelve men having been raised for the road party, *including* those from the exploring party who joined with those furnished by the emigrants. The number of road workers was probably closer to twice that many, all the emigrants who eventually volunteered for road-working duty.[10]

Of the original fifteen explorers, only Scott and Goff, who accompanied the emigrant train, and Boygus, who left for the east at Ft. Hall, were unavailable for the road party. This left twelve explorers for road working, not counting any emigrants who volunteered. Lindsay Applegate identified nine emigrants who joined the road workers, plus a Bannock Indian. These nine emigrant road workers would supplement the twelve explorers already available, to make up the twenty-one road worker count given by Lindsay Applegate. Botanist Joseph Burke, who joined Applegate's road party at Ft. Hall, said "we numbered 24" including himself, which was probably nearer the actual count. And two dozen road workers were only twenty percent fewer than the thirty Scott had anticipated, so they probably weren't that far off the mark of what they thought would be necessary.

However, according to Scott there was a far bigger problem even than the number of road workers. "Some of the emigrants seemed to think me under obligations to furnish them a good, easy road, with plenty of grass and water all the way through. These demands were extravagant and foolish," Scott asserted, "for they knew as well as I did that there was no road at all till we should make it." Yet explorers Harris and Goff at the mouth of Goose Creek had specifically told the emigrants "they could drive right along into Oregon on this new route without any trouble at all." And Jesse Applegate's waybill posted at Ft. Hall tole how this fine new road would be opened at the expense of the citizens of Oregon, and "nothing whatever demanded of the emigrants?"

There was no apparent way the emigrants could have "known in advance" anything about the condition of this so-called new "road" they had been "induced" to travel (Scott's term), or to whom Scott was referring to as the "we" who should have had to build it. It is doubtful that had the emigrants known in advance that they would be required to build a road as they went along, that they would have chosen to embark on such a dubious and demanding undertaking.

The situation about whom and how many were to have been responsible for building the road has never been adequately clarified to this day. Later in the journey, Scott did suggest that any delays resulting from the lack of an adequate roadbed may not have arisen so much from any lack in the number of road workers or their industry, but rather from the advanced road working party not having spent sufficient time actually preparing the road beforehand, which was probably nearer the true situation, as unfolding events later disclosed.[11]

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In getting underway, Scott also expressed misgivings not only with the "quantity" of road workers, but with the overall "quality" of the emigrants who had chosen the South Road, as well as suitability of their teams and wagons.

SCOTT: Those who had turned aside to follow us were the extreme rear of the emigration, and a large percentage of them had poor teams, and were more slothful and indolent men than those who had pressed forward and gone on, down the Snake river before we could meet them. We were frequently detained for an hour or two by some man being slow and careless about getting ready to start, and it would not do to leave a family alone among the hostile Indians, who were very numerous, and were watching us all the time.

It typically cost $1000 to outfit a wagon, when $1 a day was good wages. “What this points out is that the migration to Oregon was essentially a middle-class movement. The rich had no reason to go and the poor could not afford it.” But Scott concluded that because the emigrants were at the rear of the 1846 wagon train, somehow they were mostly inferior in motivation, teams, and so forth, to those ahead of them who arrived at Ft. Hall before Jesse Applegate got there, and consequently all ended up on the northern route.[12]

The Applegate brothers had traveled with the “Cow Column” near the rear of the 1843 wagon train, and Scott in leaving late had also traveled toward the rear of the 1844 train. Barlow Road founders Sam Barlow and Joel Palmer likewise were near the rear of the 1845 train. Yet all of these men proved to be anything but “slothful and indolent.” In fact, in 1845 it was those emigrants departing from St. Joe and generally traveling at the *front* of the train, who had encountered all the difficulty in taking Stephen Meek's new cutoff across central Oregon. Those departing from Independence in that previous year were at the rear of the train, and proceeded without incident on the regular route down to The Dalles. In 1846, virtually all the rear companies that ended up taking the South Road had departed from Independence, Missouri, and hence found themselves traveling toward the rear of the entire migration simply by virtue of Independence being the further jumping-off point – not of any indolence on their part.

Had, as Scott suggested, most of those 1846 companies in the rear of the wagon train been traveling there due to the "indolence" of their drivers or poorer quality of their teams, then they would most likely have fallen even further behind the forward companies as the wagons moved along. Such was not the case. Most of those traveling toward the rear of the train were not there because they were “losing ground” to those ahead of them, by traveling too slowly. It had taken chronicler Virgil Pringle’s party ninety-two days to travel the 1158 miles from Independence to Ft. Hall, in exactly three months from May 7 to August 6 – at a quite respectable average speed of 12.6 miles per day. Historian Dale Morgan concluded later that this was “excellent progress: Pringle was able to celebrate the Fourth of July at Independence Rock," and thus was right “on schedule.” Capt. J. B. Riggs on the 1845 train had arrived at Independence Rock one day later than Pringle, despite Riggs having started out earlier in the year and having left from the nearer St. Joe.[13]

But Scott was still not satisfied with those he was leading on the Southern Route. As they moved along down the route, Scott also expressed dissatisfaction with the manageability of these South Road emigrants from Independence:

SCOTT: I had traveled with emigrants before, and could make allowance for many things that an inexperienced person might not have been so patient with. These people had traveled together so long that they had learned each other's foibles, and frequently took delight in playing upon each other's weaknesses; they sometimes quarreled, and many of them held some petty grudge against nearly everybody else; they were, at least, disgusted with each other in many instances; they became reckless of wounding each other's feelings; they would frequently speak out, without due reflection, they gossiped about each other; and there was nearly always a wrangle of some kind in the camp. [Scott was quite explicit in labeling them as] …the most difficult crowd to manage I ever got into. Although they usually treated me with becoming deference and respect, sometimes they would not follow my directions and suggestions, which almost invariably resulted in some hindrance and embarrassment to the whole company. I sometimes felt like I ought to kick myself for being so stupid, as to board myself and work for nothing in all of these hazardous and laborious efforts to serve the interests of such an insolent and ungrateful crowd.[14]

Scott had apparently forgotten that as an emigrant-leader on the 1844 wagon train, he himself had made a very similar comment about the membership of this earlier migration:

SCOTT: By the time we reached the crossing of the South Fork of the Platte, nearly every person in the train was more or less dissatisfied. Some complained of the Captain, some murmured against one man, and some against another. When we would lay by a day to rest the teams, the children would fall out, and quarrel with each other. Some of the women disagreed and gossiped about each other, and sometimes they quarreled because their children quarreled. Some of the men were always finding fault, first with one thing and then with another till it seemed like the Devil had broken loose among us.[15]

Unlike an army company comprised of a few officers with numerous soldiers trained to follow them, Oregon Trail emigrants were mostly leaders with few followers. Most emigrant families were not only of means (as evidenced by many having extra wagons and often being accompanied by young men who had hired on to drive them), but also very independent-minded (why else would they embark on such a venture?). For example, leaders Peter Burnett, Jesse Applegate and James Nesmith of the 1843 migration were described as "fiercely independent individuals" … “difficult to lead;” never being willing to “submit to discipline as soldiers;” “which will always be the difficulty with heterogeneous masses of emigrants crossing these plains.” In crossing the plains, "unmanageability" was apparently the rule rather than the exception – therefore,

perhaps, not at all unique to these South Road travelers, as Scott had suggested.[16]

Although Scott did express these serious misgivings at the beginning of the trip, the South Road emigrants were already en route, and their die had therefore been cast. Under Scott's apparent reluctant guidance, the Southern Route emigrant train proceeded on down the Humboldt River on the first section of the new road that initially followed the path of the California Trail. This well-traveled part of the route proved to be what Lindsay Applegate labeled as "uneventful," but the emigrants were fast approaching the turn-off point, where they would leave this well-established route. Soon, the emigrants would embark on the remainder of this new Southern Route into Oregon, over which wagons had never traveled -- beginning with a trip through an arid Nevada desert under the hot summer sun. These trusting emigrants were about to learn first hand what it would be like to become the first emigrants ever to undertake Jesse Applegate's untried "superior" new road that entered into Oregon from the south.