

EZRA MEEKER

Ezra Meeker, "Trip through Natchess Pass," Pioneer Reminiscences of Puget Sound. Seattle, Lowman and Hanford, 1903, p. 90 - 131

[excerpts]

Toward nightfall I heard a welcome sound of the tinkling of a bell, and soon saw the smoke of camp fires, and finally the village of tents and grime covered wagons. How I tugged at Bobby's halter to make him go faster, and then mounted him with not much better results, can better be imagined than told.

Could it be the camp I was searching for? It was about the number of wagons and tents that I had expected to meet. No. I was doomed to disappointment, yet rejoiced to find some one to camp with and talk to other than the pony. It is not easy to describe the cordial greeting accorded me by those tired and almost discouraged immigrants. If we had been near and dear relatives, the rejoicing could not have been mutually greater. They had been toiling for nearly five months on the road across the plains, and now there loomed up before them this great mountain range to cross. Could they do it? If we cannot get over with our wagons, can we get the women and children through in safety? I was able to lift a load of doubt and fear from off their jaded minds. Before I knew what was happening, I caught the fragrance of boiling coffee and of fresh meat cooking. It seemed the good matrons knew without telling that I was hungry (I doubtless looked it), and had set to work to prepare me a meal, a sumptuous meal at that, taking into account the whetted appetite incident to a diet of hard bread straight, and not much of that either, for two days.

We had met on the hither bank of the Yakima River, where the old trail crosses that river near where the flourishing city of North Yakima now is. These were the people, a part of them, that are mentioned elsewhere in the chapter on the White River massacre. Harvey H. Jones, wife and three children, and George E. King, wife and one child. One of the little boys of the camp is the same person, John I. King, who has written the graphic account of the tragedy that follows, in which his mother and step father and their neighbors lost their lives in that horrible massacre on White River a year later, and the other, George E. King, (but no relation) the little five-year-old who was taken and held captive for nearly four months, and then safely delivered over by the Indians to the military authorities at Fort Steilacoom. I never think of those people but with feelings of sadness; of their struggle, doubtless the supreme effort. of their lives, to go to their death. I pointed out to them where to go to get good claims, and they lost no time, but went straight to the locality recommended and immediately to work, preparing shelter for the winter.

"Are you going out on those plains alone?" asked Mrs. Jones, anxiously. When informed that I would have the pony with me, a faint, sad smile spread over her countenance as she said, "Well, I don't think it is safe."

Mr. Jones explained that what his wife referred to was the danger from the ravenous wolves that infested the open country, and from which they had lost weakened stock from their bold forages, "right close to the camp," he said, and advised me not to camp near the watering places, but up on the high ridge.

I followed his advice with the result as we shall see of missing my road and losing considerable time, and causing me not a little trouble and anxiety.

WHITE RIVER MASSACRE. Ezra Meeker, "White River Massacre," Pioneer Reminiscences of Puget Sound. Seattle: Lowman and Hanford, 1903, p. 289 - 303. [excerpts].

On the very day (October 28, 1855) that Governor Stevens made his final start for home from the Blackfeet council grounds on the Missouri River, a thousand miles distant from his capital, and one day after the killing of McAllister, nine persons were massacred on the White River, about twenty miles south of Seattle.

These people were peacefully living at their usual homes when the attack was made upon them. They were killed ruthlessly—men, women and children—with atrocities too vile to describe and mutilations of bodies so often seen in Indian warfare.

There were three parties that simultaneously attacked the three families so nearly destroyed, whose cabins were separated but short distances on the three claims occupied. The intervening timber shut out from view their neighbors' cabins, and each met their doom without the knowledge of the fate of their neighbors.

Two of these families Harvey H. Jones and George E. King, I had met on the Yakima crossing about September 8, 1854, and camped with them over night. As I was the first white man they had seen who had lived in the country in which they were just then arriving from a wearisome trip across the plains, they naturally plied me diligently with questions and acted upon my advice, and secured valuable claims in the White River valley exactly where I had recommended them to go.

An amusing incident occurred at the camp that evening of the day we met. I had just emerged from the mountains going out in search of relatives. My only companion was a small, white-tailed pony, my only food a sack of hard bread, and my only bedding my saddle blanket. It was but natural they should invite me to accept their hospitality, to eat at their table and sleep in their tent. I had experienced great fatigue in the forced march to get out of the mountains, and naturally, after eating heartily, soon became drowsy and anxious for rest. But the desire for information about the country they were seeking, the conditions of the roads and numerous other matters, was not easily satisfied, and so the volley of questions continued until late in the evening.

Finally a lull in the conversation came, and I thought my trial at an end, when suddenly Mr. Jones broke the silence with the question: "Can you see the sun rise in that country?" Thinking it was an idle question merely with a view to continue the conversation and feeling annoyed and perhaps half vexed that I had not escaped the continuation of the long series of questioning and perhaps with a view of putting an end to it, I answered, before taking a second thought how it would sound, that they could if they were up early enough in the morning.

This answer, coupled with my manner and tone, brought an awkward pause and embarrassment, but the quick wit and tact of the lady, Mrs. Jones, came to the rescue by saying that they had lived in a deep canyon in Wisconsin, where the sun could not be seen until far above the horizon, ending the incident with a hearty laugh all round.

I never saw these people again, though afterwards have frequently traversed their settlement, and ten years later surveyed their donation land claims and could even at that late date the remains of their industrious year's labor. One of them had brought a lot of seeds across the 2,000-mile stretch of the plains, with which to plant a nursery. The remaining of this nursery could be seen for years as a melancholy reminder of the tragic event that cost these people their lives. The others, W. H. Brennan, wife and child and Enos Cooper, who lost their lives, had previously made their homes on an adjoining claim.