

NACHES PASS TRAIL SMITH ACCT.

(Smith, Alfred J. The First Wagon Train Over Naches Pass, Tacoma Washington, May 8, 1947.).

During the gold rush of 1849, Asher Sargent and his son Nelson, left Indiana for California. The next year they drifted northward finally arriving in the Puget Sound Country. Some time later, in 1850, Nelson and a number of others were shipwrecked on Queen Charlotte Island, being virtually held prisoners among the natives for several months.

The father supposed he was lost, and in 1851 returned to Indiana. Upon being rescued, Nelson wrote home informing his family of his safety. So, in the spring of 1853 the Sargents, Longmires, Van Ogles, and possibly others from Indiana started for Oregon. Gradually others joined the party, all bound for the Willamette Valley.

When the time came to send a man down the trail to intercept the Longmire party, Nelson Sargent, who was working with the Kirtley crew on the eastern end of the road (the Naches Pass Trail), was chosen for that job.

At Grande Ronde, Nelson Sargent met John Lane, who had arrived there in advance of the main party; then continued his journal until he met his aged parents, bringing to the trail-weary travelers the welcome news that a crew of workmen had started from Olympia and Steilacoom to make a road for them through the Naches Pass over the Cascade Mountains, and were even then pushing to completion the work on the new road.

The effect of Nelson Sargent's presence, and his description of the magnificent future of Puget Sound, caused most members of this company of more than one hundred forty people to turn aside and follow Sargent's leadership.

At Umatilla campground, situated about three miles below the present city of Pendleton, Oregon, the party left the emigrant trail leading into Oregon and with thirty-six wagons turned northward to Fort Walla, a trading post fifty miles farther on, kept by an agent of the Hudson's Bay Company.

There, with lumber whipsawed from driftwood from the Columbia River, they constructed a flatboat upon which to ferry their goods across the river. On September 8, 1853, at 2:00 o'clock in the afternoon, their boat was finished; and by sunrise the next morning everything except the horses and cattle had been safely landed.

With the help of Indians, the live stock was made to swim across where they landed safely.

From this point the party continued up the Yakima River, crossing it eight times; then to the Naches River through sage brush frequently as high as a covered wag which had to be cut down before passing through it.

On September 15th, they reached the mountains and were disappointed to find only an Indian trail to follow. They pressed onward as well as they could, following the bed of the stream, first on one side and then on the other.

After crossing the canyon at Well springs, they found the trail that the settlers had blazed for them. On about the 18th of September, they traversed the canyon for about a mile and came out on a beautiful plain. Following along Coal Creek for two days they came to Selah Valley on the Upper Yakima which they crossed, taking their course along Wenas Creek about ten miles where they came to a garden kept by the Indians.

Here they bought ten bushels of potatoes and had a real feast of potatoes boiled in their jackets. September 20th to 21st were spent resting in camp.

Following Wenas Creek to its source they crossed to the Naches River, which they followed four days, crossing and re-crossing it sixty-eight times, then left it and started the climb to the summit, which they reached in three days.

There they found abundant grass and good water for the exhausted horses and cattle. Here they stopped two more days, allowing their tired oxen to rest and gain strength for the rest of the journey. This was about the first of October, 1853.

Three miles farther on they came to the Summit Hill where a halt was called. And no wonder, for lying straight across their path was a steep mountain declivity. For a sheer thirty feet or more there was an almost perpendicular bluff down which they must go, there being no way around it.

When they first saw what lay before them, one lady, Mrs. Woollery, of the party exclaimed, "Why, Lawsee Massie. We have come to the jumping-off place at last."

And so it seemed to many others of the party. But not so the leaders. They would set about to find a way. Many times on the westward trail there had arisen seemingly unsurmountable obstacles to bar further progress, but always there had been found some way to overcome them, and so it would be this time.

At last the longest rope in the company was stretched down the cliff, leaving just enough to loop twice around a small tree which stood on the brink of the precipice, but it was found to be too short.

Finally a steer was butchered and the skin made into rope to lengthen the first one. Still it was too short; so, two more steers were killed and the skins used in the same manner as the first, before the rope was sufficiently long for their purpose.

With the rope securely tied to the rear of a wagon, it was pushed over the rim and slowly lowered to a point where it would stand up safely. There all four wheels were locked and small logs with projecting limbs tied behind to check its forward movement.

In this manner it could be taken down to a stream, then known as "Greenwater" by a yoke of oxen hitched to the wagon.

It took the best part of two days to make this descent, but all thirty-six wagons were lowered to safety, except the one belonging to Mr. Lane; this one was crushed by the breaking of one of the

ropes, causing him and his wife to continue the rest of the trip on horse back.

It was at this point Andrew Burge arrived with the pack-train loaded with supplies. After distributing the food, he returned to Fort Steilacoom blazing the trees and leaving notes as he retraced his way. Slowly the company advanced, cheered by the assurance that the end of the trail was only a matter of days that could be counted.

At last, on October 8th, 1853, the first emigrant train to cross over the Naches Pass road, made their last camp, as a complete unit, some three hundred yards from the Mahon claim on Clover Creek.

As early pioneers were always glad to welcome neighbors, and to witness an increase in the population of the country, the Mahons extended a hearty welcome to the new comers, furnishing them with vegetables from their own gardens.

Mrs. Mahon proved to be a splendid hostess to the party in their last camping place, doing all she could to make the women of the train welcome; and played a conspicuous part in preparing the final meal before the members of the caravan separated to find new homes.

At this place the party broke up, some going south into Oregon, some north into King County, some farther west to Thurston County, and some to other sections of the scarcely settled territory.

A monument was erected near this final camping place in 1913 by the Washington State Historical Society commemorating one of the most important events in the early history of Pierce County.