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THROUGH THE "MAGNIFICENT GATEWAY"

The Columbia River Gorge and Early Emigrant Travel

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Mid-19th century overlanders encountered numerous odd and frequently challenging geologic settings on their arduous journey to the Northwest. Following along the strangely braided Platte River, they passed the fascinating monoliths of Courthouse Rock, Chimney Rock, and Scotts Bluff, then struggled up the Sweetwater Valley past the curious granitic features of Independence Rock and Devils Gate. After conquering the Continental Divide at South Pass, their journey continued over deserts and mountains, some attaining heights of over 8,000 feet. Withstanding the midsummer heat on the desolate Snake River plateau, they followed the elusive river entrenched deep within the black basalt of ancient lava flows. Once through the Burnt River Valley, surrounded by towering mountains and the rugged Blue Mountains, they eventually arrived at The Dalles on the Columbia River. None of these experiences, however, exceeded the unique geologic setting and physical challenge that the emigrants experienced during their final effort, traversing the Columbia River Gorge.

For those who chose to continue from The Dalles down the Columbia River, the next 50 miles or so would be through one of the most scenic and geologically fascinating sections of their journey. Geologist John Eliot Allen appropriately referred to the Columbia River Gorge as "The Magnificent Gateway." It has long served man as a passageway through the formidable Cascade range. For thousands of years Native Americans used it as a trade route between coastal and eastern tribes. The Lewis and Clark expedition, the first Euro-Americans to use this waterway, were soon followed by fur traders and trappers, then thousands of emigrants.

Today this important passageway is not only a major water route for commerce but is traversed by two railroads and several highways.

Geologic History

Geologically, this gap through the Cascades is the result of a series of amazing and dynamic natural processes. Between 17 and 10 million years ago, long before the Cascade range was uplifted to its present height, lava flows of the Columbia River basalt group poured westward to the sea, spreading as far south as today's Newport, Oregon, and north to Grays Harbor in Washington.

Beginning some 10 million years ago, the area of today's Cascade Mountains began to gradually arch upward and the Columbia River slowly shifted its course northwestward, finally establishing its present channel about 5 million years ago. There it continued to scour itself deeper and deeper into the basalt pile and drain more than a quarter million square miles of the Pacific Northwest.

During the Ice Age this passageway was involved in yet another series of geologic events. Each time a continental ice sheet advanced from the north, a large tongue of ice repeatedly extended across the Clark Fork of the Columbia River, forming a 2,500-foot-high ice dam behind which Lake Missoula impounded some 500 cubic miles of water. When the water became deep enough, the ice dam began to float. With the sudden failure of the dam, a huge surge of ice and water swept forward at a rate of 30 to 50 miles per hour over the Columbia River plateau, bringing with it anything loose in its path including much of the thick, windblown silt and sand (loess) that at one time covered the channeled scablands of eastern Washington. Geologists now believe that such a cataclysmic event took place at least 40 times between 15,000 and 12,000 years ago. Needless to say, the present-day appearance of the Columbia River Gorge is largely the result of erosion caused by the massive volumes of water, laden with silt, sand, and boulders of all sizes, along with boulder-studded icebergs that poured through this gorge. During some of these floods, water backed up in the Willamette Valley, depositing much of the rich silt and sand that had been removed from eastern Washington. Thus, the fertile soil the emigrants were coming to claim and cultivate had been transported there some 10,000 years before their arrival.

The most recent geological catastrophic event to shape the gorge occurred some 300 to 500 years ago when millions of tons of rock debris slid southward off the side of 3,400-foot, basalt capped Table Mountain, creating a huge debris dam across the valley. Eventually the river cut a notch through the top of the slide and formed a boulder-strewn channel approximately one and a half miles south of its original course. This section of the river became known as the Cascades of the Columbia River. Because it was unnavigable, early travelers were compelled to portage about four miles along its north (Washington) bank. With the debris dam in place, water became impounded nearly to The Dalles, forming a body of water, as the emigrants would later discover, with virtually no current. Furthermore, the flooding of the valley inundated low forestlands along the river. Many tree stumps were still standing above the water surface when early travelers passed through the area. Captain Meriwether Lewis entered in his journal on April 14, 1806, "We find the trunks of many large pine trees s[t]anding erect as they grew, at present [in] 30 feet [of] water...." Today, the Cascades rapids as well as the drowned forest are completely submerged beneath the even higher water level created by Bonneville Dam.

Emigrant Travel

After a long, arduous journey of some six months' duration, mid-19th-century westward travelers were nearly exhausted by the time they reached The Dalles, Oregon Territory. During peak years, especially in 1852, travel was particularly trying. Crowded conditions took their toll. Poor sanitation created much sickness, especially cholera and other related diseases. Forage became scarce for the cattle, and many either died or were greatly weakened. Food supplies dwindled, and many travelers could not afford to restock at way stations where prices were usually exorbitant. Therefore, upon arrival at The Dalles, emigrants were in need of rest or time to recuperate from their ills. Furthermore, if they were to continue their journey down the river, they either had to construct some sort of conveyance or wait for available passage.

Until 1846, when Samuel Barlow built his toll road around the south side of Mount Hood and through the Cascade Mountains, emigrants had no choice but to follow the Columbia River through its steep-walled gorge cut into numerous layers of volcanic rock. Even after 1845, those who arrived late in the season frequently chose to continue on the Columbia waterway rather than battle the early snowfall up in the Cascade range.

Travel down the river from The Dalles to the upper Cascades, a distance of about 40 miles, was aboard almost anything that would float. Many built rafts. On October 6, 1852, James Akin, Jr., recorded: "Preparing to raft down the river. Have got some pine logs to the river." That same day, Alvah Davis "took passage in an Indian canoe." The Adams and Blank families arrived at The Dalles on October 24 of that year and boarded "an open kiel boat rowed by three men." The following day John Spencer "made a bargain with a flat boat owner to take [his] wagon...and family down to the Cascades and with Valentine [they] took...[their] cattle...down the pack trail." Willis and Mary Ann Boatman together with Willis's brother John, arrived at The Dalles sometime late that September. All were in poor health. Mary Ann was suffering with scurvy, Willis was weak with a fever, and John was seriously ill with mountain fever. After resting at The Dalles for several weeks, Willis and others met "...a man who had an old bateau [a flat bottom boat].... [They] made a contract with him to take [them] down to the Cascade Falls."

It would seem that river travel should have been reasonably easy compared to the myriad problems the emigrants had experienced on the plains and through mountains. Nevertheless, they did encounter difficulties. Probably the major problem was wind. In the Columbia River Gorge strong upstream winds, which today provide desirable conditions for wind surfing, created major problems for such low-powered craft as were used by the emigrants. Furthermore, the river was virtually a lake, with practically no downstream current between The Dalles and the Cascades rapids. Cecelia Adams wrote: "The river here changes from being a rapid, shallow, and narrow stream...[to] a wide deep and still on[e] in places more than a mile wide.... Such difficulties as were encountered in the Columbia River Gorge were recorded by many emigrants. Willis Boatman's following story of their journey down the river exemplifies some of these problems.

> *I hired a man to help drive my cattle down the river by the trail. Myself and wife and brother got aboard the boat, then everything being ready, we pushed out from the shore and started down the river. But had only gotten a few miles til the wind commenced to blow a perfect gale and blew us up against a rocky bluff where the rocks were probably thirty or forty feet high and almost perpendicular. Fortunately we all had our tent poles on board, so the men all gathered a pole apiece and stood on the edge of the boat next to the rocks, the women all getting on the opposite side to trim the craft so that when she came up to the rocks we were all ready with our poles to keep her from hitting the rocks. We had to stand there about four hours and hold her off those rocks before the wind lulled enough so that we could drop down to a place where we could land and get ashore. We finally landed and lay there the rest of that day and night. About ten o'clock the next day it calmed down and we again loaded up and started out.*
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> *That evening we pass the boys with the cattle. They called aboard and told me that my man had left and that I would have to come and tend to my cattle myself or they would have to leave them. That was bad news for me, for I was so weak I could hardly walk. So I went ashore and started on with the cattle, getting along better than I expected.*

The Adamses and Blanks, in their keelboat, "had a very favorable run for the weather was calm." Although it rained hard much of the time, they managed to reach within six miles of the Cascades the first day. The following day they reached the Cascades, which Parthenia Blank described as "consisting of an immense pile of loose rock across the stream over which water runs with great rapidity for 6 miles."

The Akin family, on a raft, was not as lucky. For three days they battled upstream winds. Having floated 17 miles, all but two men gave up the raft and employed an Indian with a canoe to take

them the remainder of the distance, arriving at the rapids about two in the afternoon on October 15.

The Pack Trail

The pack or packer's trail, used primarily for moving cattle from The Dalles to the Cascades, was a very difficult route, demanding nearly all the strength and stamina tired emigrants could muster. Because along much of the way mountains extended to the water's edge, rarely was there a passageway along the river. It was therefore necessary to ascend and descend numerous, steep ridges between tributary streams. Furthermore, to add to the misery, by September the rainy season had begun. Together with the wind and mud generated by constant cattle use, the pack trail was an unpleasant route.

The first half of the way to Hood River, then called Dog River, was almost entirely up and down over mountain ridges. John McAllister, who on October 12, 1852, reached this river by way of the cattle trail, wrote that prior to reaching "Dog River" they ascended and descended several mountains, one of which "possessed a surface [of] loose gravel, which slips under foot, making it almost insurmountable for weak stock." The following day, in the vicinity of what McAllister referred to as "Upper Ferry," he recorded: "Here the mountain joins the river & is most awful place I suppose that ever stock were driven over the surface being huge rocks which lays loose & mavible [movable]...many cattle and horses killed here."

Upper Ferry probably was situated near today's small community of Wyeth, Oregon, some seven or eight miles upstream from the Cascades. John Spencer, upon reaching this ferry on October 31, also referred to "unmercifully bad road" just beyond the ferry. He further noted that, although they lost no cattle, they "saw numbers, which had tumbled over and perished.... It was a horrible place." In addition to the bad road, he wrote, "The rain increased so as to pour down." That evening, after finding a tolerable place to camp, he reported that they were "wet to the skin and cold we hunted up stuff for fire got supper laid down tired limbs and weary frame in wet clothes, and wrapped ourselves in wet covering."

"Lower Ferry," according to John McAllister, who crossed there on October 15, was "4 miles by land through the timber and about 2 and a half miles by water..." from the Cascades. That would place the ferry just upstream from the present-day town of Stevenson, Washington.

The highlight of Willis Boatman's pack trail experience took place at one of these ferries, probably the upper one.

> *We drove on down to where we had to ferry our cattle across the Columbia river, about five miles above the Cascade falls. The boat landed about one hundred yards from the bank of the river and we had to drive our cattle over a rocky flat. Some of the rocks two feet high in the trail we had to drive over, and water some times was two feet deep. I mention this to show the disposition that some acquire in crossing the plains.*
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> *When I got to the ferry there was one man ahead of me, but his cattle had got away and when the boat came I drove my cattle through this narrow and rugged trail which was hard work to do. Before I got my cattle aboard this man came and demanded his turn and wanted me to drive my cattle out so he could get in with his. I told him that it would be almost impossible for me to get my cattle back.*
>
> *He swore that he would thrash h-out of me if I didn't drive them out and let him in. I was sitting on a big rock when he was talking, hardly able to stand. I raised up told him to get at it as soon as he felt like it; that I would not try to get them back nor he would not either. I finally told him that*

> *if he could get his around mine he could do so. He did this. I got across and when I got down to the cascades, there I found the folks camped.*

The Cascades

Even though travel by water was frequently hampered by wind, it usually required less time to make the journey to the Cascades rapids than it did for those using the pack trail. Thus, families often had to wait a few days at the Cascades for those bringing the cattle along the trail. In fact, at no other place on the long journey did families endure such a long separation. By late fall, camping conditions were usually miserable in the cold rain and mud. Furthermore, much sickness prevailed and, with inadequate facilities to care for the ill, there was much suffering. John Spencer, who arrived at the Cascades with his cattle the evening of November 5, wrote the following gloomy report about conditions upon his arrival:

> *All stuff...had been lying in the wet...for near two weeks...all was wet in the tent.... All were sick. I was fatigued almost to death.... Wet clothes, wet beds, rain, mud, cold, bad wood, and poor fire, with little to eat, and to crowded all sick myself and family, all work hard up on me.*

Upon arrival at the Cascades, Willis Boatman was saddened to learn that his brother's condition had worsened:

> *When I got down to the cascades, there I found the folks camped. My brother was not expected to live. I went to him and found him in a dying condition. He lived until next morning when about two a. m. on the sixteenth day of October he died. This was another hard duty to perform but we had to make the best of it. So Mr. Scott and myself went down to an old mill and got some lumber and made a box.*
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> *We buried him at the graveyard at the Cascade Falls on the Columbia...digging that grave and laying him away so near the end of the long trail pretty nearly took all the strength we had. But we couldn't give up. It was strange how lonely we were, never out of sight of hundreds of other emigrant wagons all the way across, and yet we ourselves, just absolutely alone in our two wagons, and now, my wife and I had no one but each other.*

With his family, William Scott, who had helped bury John Boatman, accompanied the Boatmans during much of the journey. The graveyard where Willis buried his brother is on a wooded knoll overlooking the Columbia River. Today very little remains to indicate that the area was once a cemetery. The trace of the old wagon trail leading up the ravine from the head of the rapids lies just below this site.

By 1852 a considerable community had developed on the north side of the Columbia River, just a mile or so west of what is now the town of Stevenson. Its existence came about largely because of its proximity to the upper end of unnavigable water at the Cascades rapids. At this point, all travel continued by portage for some four miles around the Cascades on the north (Washington) side of the river, either by a tramway that had been recently constructed or, more commonly, by wagon road. According to Origen Thomson, in 1852 the community consisted "of three houses, in which are two stores and one dwelling; one of the houses is two stories high. In the upper story is a boarding house, and below a store." Daniel and Putnam Bradford (brothers) owned the general store. The mill where Willis obtained lumber for his brother's coffin, also owned by the Bradfords, stood a short distance down the wagon road from the graveyard. None of these structures exists today.

The Portage

After assembling their wagons and loading them, the Boatmans and the William Scott family traveled about six miles on the old wagon road around the Cascades to what Willis described as "the steamboat landing at the lower end of the falls." On September 22, Origen Thomson declared this road "a very bad road; hilly, rocky, and stumpy-in fact, the worst I have met with."

The first of several railroad transport systems was constructed in 1852. The Adams-Blank party, upon arrival at the Cascades rapids in the rain on October 25 of that year, made use of this tramway for conveying their belongings and walked to the lower Cascades. Parthenia Blank described the contraption as,

> *A railroad 3 miles long made of scantling [timber frame] and plank without iron. On this runs a small car propelled by a mule attached by a long rope for an engine and a pair of thrills [shafts on each side of the mule] between which the engineer stations himself and walks and guides the car. On this the charge is 75 cts. per cwt. But takes no passengers. At the end of the railroad the goods have to be let down perpendicularly some 150 feet [others estimate 50 feet] to the river from whence they are taken on a boat to the steamboat landing about 3 miles more.*

The Adams and Blank families completed their 65-mile journey to Portland in relative comfort aboard the steamer *Multnomah*. John Spencer and his family also made use of the tramway and completed their journey by steamer.

When the Boatmans reached the steamboat landing by way of the trail, they were understandably in poor spirits and nearly out of food. Willis recalled:

> *Our supplies were about gone...and our appetites were not good after the fever. It was hard to eat the little stale and moldy food we had left. We were in this plight, hardly able to move, wondering what to do, how best to get down the Columbia to Portland, when a kindhearted settler, a James Stevens, came up to meet the train with a whole scow load of fresh vegetables. I arranged with him, after the treasures he had brought us was divided up among us all, to take my wife and household goods back with him.*
>
> *We again unloaded our stuff, took our wagons apart, loaded them on the boat and started again by water to Portland. I with some others started on the trail with the remains of our teams.*

The Final Effort

The trail continued on the north side of the Columbia River and followed a route similar to today's Washington State Highway 14, soon passing Beacon Rock. John McAllister, who passed this landmark on October 21, referred to it as "Big Rock" and gave the following description: "about 1000 ft [tall] nearly all the way perpendicular is probably a half mile in circumference has timber growing on top...."

From Beacon Rock the trail ascended and descended several mountainous areas until finally the valley widened and mountains disappeared, just a few miles east of today's Washougal.

According to John McAllister, in 1852 a ferry crossed the Columbia River in the vicinity of the "mouth of the Sandy River on the other side of here." He further stated that the "ferry of the Columbia...is just above [an] Island." This island, nearly two miles in length, is known today as Lady Island. Its east end lies north of the mouth of the Sandy River and south of the town of Camas.

The water route that Mary Ann Boatman and others used from the mouth of the Sandy River would have been about 20 miles westward down the Columbia River to the mouth of the

Willamette, then up that river southeastwardly for some eight or ten miles to the thriving community of Portland. Although the pack trail route is not fully known, it likely led overland from the mouth of the Sandy River westward to Portland on the Willamette, a distance of at least 13 miles.

The scow with Mary Ann and the couple's possessions reached the east bank of the Willamette River, present site of East Portland, on October 22, 1852. Willis recalled, "I'll never forget the sorry picture my young wife made sitting on the banks of the river, keeping guard over her pitiful household goods, crying when I drove up."

They camped on the river bank that night, and the next day Willis went to the community of Portland to look for a house:

> *I looked all over the place (and by the way, that did not take long for there were not more than twenty houses in the place), but I could find nothing but an old shed which had an old dirt fireplace in it and one side out to the commons. I secured it and moved over that night. We carried what little stuff we had on our backs, made our beds down on the dirt floor without sweeping. This was the first roof that we had been under for seven long months....*
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> *I presume you think we had a good night's sleep, but far from it! We got to our journey's end, but we then just began to realize our situation. Here we were three thousand miles from our homes and relatives, without money and without home, among strangers and in a strange land. So you may imagine that there was not much sleep that night. There were more tears shed than sleeping done that night.*

During those long months on the road, Willis and Mary Ann, like many others, had concentrated on surviving the seemingly never-ending journey. Now that they had reached the end of the Oregon Trail, they suddenly realized that their struggle for survival was far from over.

Great-grandson of Mary Ann and Willis Boatman, Weldon W. Rau is a retired research geologist who had careers with both the United States Geological Survey and the State of Washington. This article was excerpted, with permission of the publisher, from Surviving the Oregon Trail, 1852 *(Washington State University Press, 2001).*

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