

Oliver B. Slater's Trip Across the Plains in 1862

On the twelfth day of May, 1862, I left Garden Grove, Iowa, headed for the West. Our train consisted of seven wagons, drawn by mules and horses. Two wagons belonging to my father and mother. We traveled alone until we reached the Missouri River, May 19th. There we fell in with 29 more wagons from Iowa, Wisconsin, and New York. We traveled together up the Platte River.

The first Indians we saw were on the South Platte River near Red Bluff, Nebraska. They were on the warpath, we saw them for days along the river, there were ten thousand Sioux consisting of bucks, squaws, and papooses. Some were moving, dragging their lodge poles tied to ponys, with their lodges and belongings strapped on the poles, squaws and papooses riding on top.

We traveled up the Platte River to Sweetwater (now in Wyoming). July 1st we left Ice Springs on Sweetwater. On Sage Creek the Shoshone Indians attacked the rear of our wagon train cutting off one wagon belonging to men from Illinois. The wagon upset on one man, the Indians took his own axe and cut his head open. The other man they drove back about a quarter of a mile, shot three arrows into his shoulders, two through his body and shot one eye out with an arrow, cut the harness off the team and took them. The same Indians tried to cut off one four-horse team driven by a woman but by whipping up she got ahead of them. The train was halted at the foot of the hill, part of the men went back and brought in the two men killed and we buried them in one grave.

We left camp just at dusk for Antelope Springs, Wyoming, ten miles ahead, reaching there at midnight; here we overtook thirty wagons. At this time these same Shoshone Indians were burning stage stations, killing passengers and drivers on the Overland Road between Green River and Denver, also had driven off three hundred head of stock.

We passed Pacific Springs and Little Sandy arriving July 3rd at Green River.

The fourth of July, the women got up a big dinner and had a real celebration. Fifteen persons were sent out to guard the stock while they were grazing about eight miles from camp. I being one of them, missed my dinner. In the afternoon we saw Indians watching us about a mile away on the hills. We gathered up our stock and went to camp about as fast as we could get there. We did not see any more of the Indians.

That night we pulled the wagons across to the ferry boat. Taking about forty men to each wagon as it was too muddy for the horses to pull. The wagons were ferried across in the night. At this point the Oregon and California roads separated. We took the Oregon Trail for Soda Springs, the rest of the company took the California Trail.

The next stream was Hams Fork at Green River. The stream being too deep to ford we crossed by means of a raft made of poles, which we pulled from side to side by ropes. After going over the Bear River Divide we passed through a grove of fir timber, the first we had seen since leaving the Missouri River. In this timber there was about three feet of snow.

We arrived in Soda Springs in Idaho about July 15th. We were just coming into camp, the teams ahead were unhitched and turned out to graze, when five Indians can down the creek as though they were coming to camp. When near the camp they turned toward the horses and began shaking their robes stampeding the nineteen head. The men with the horses started shooting, the Indians returning the fire, but none of our men were hurt. Some of the horses were hobbled with leather hobbles, other with iron shackles. The leather hobbles were cut while the horses were running. The horses with the iron shackles they had to leave. We watched them drive the horses up the mountain but did not dare follow. I saw one fellow by the name of Smith who claimed to be a great Indian fighter crawl into a wagon and hide.

The next morning we had to leave seven wagons in camp taking the people and what provisions we could into our wagons. About two days later, two friends and myself stopped to pick currents by the roadside. In about ten minutes we came out of the bushes to see five Indians about a half a mile behind us on horseback coming after us and maybe you think we didn't run. They drove us to the wagons then disappeared into the brush. This was at the head of Rosses Fork, thirty-five miles from Fort Hall, where the Indian reservation now is.

Our next camp was at Snake River, July 20th. Here the roads separated, one going down the south side, one crossing to the north side and going to Big Camas. After crossing the river we camped there four days waiting for other teams to join our train. There was a band of Indians here who had just come down from the Flat Head Country where they had had a fight and a number of their warriors killed. There were several squaws in little wickiups who had lost their braves in war and were mourning for them. Their way of mourning is by howling and shrieking for days without a tear. I went to one wickiup and looked in. There was a squaw sitting there with a big knife in her hand. She had cut her skin from the knee to the ankle diagonally around from both ways leaving it in diamonds about 3/4 of an inch long and cut just deep enough for the blood to ooze out in small drops. When she saw me she flourished her knife and I skip ped. She was still howling four days later when we left.

At that time Fort Hall was supposed to be in Washington. There was no Idaho or Wyoming at that time. There was not a house between old Fort Kearney (near where Kearney Junction now is) and Oregon, a distance of 1900 miles.

After camping on Snake River, waiting for teams to join us, we left on the fifth day with a train of three hundred and thirty-eight wagons, eight hundred and twenty men and about fourteen hundred head of stock. We drove out about twelve miles and camped for the night. There were fifty armed men on horses who went ahead as guards and fifty more brought up the rear. The teams were driven by women and boys mostly. The men marched in squads of twenty each to guard the train. It took this train about three hours to get in camp or out of it.

From the big spring we pulled out about three o'clock for Lost River, a distance of about forty-eight miles, reaching there about four o'clock the next day. Lost River is a stream about forty feet wide and three feet deep. At this camp my father died of mountain fever. He was buried by the roadside in a coffin made of a wagon box. This place is ten miles southeast of where Arco now is.

In the morning we had to move camp four miles up the river to get water, as the river where we were had gone dry during the night. That is why it is called Lost River. It has no outlet except by losing itself in the sand or lava which may be any where from the mountains to the sink a distance of four miles.

This July 26, 1862, we were traveling a road that had not been traveled since 1854. It was very dim and rocky. We kept scouts out hunting road every day. There were Indians on every side. They were very ugly and had murdered all emigrants traveling in 1854. Our next camp was Lava Springs, 18 miles distance. A young man by the name of Cole died and was buried here, but there were not many deaths from sickness during the trip.

From here we crossed the lava beds to Little Wood River where we found a thousand Indian warriors in camp; not a squaw or papoose was among them. They had several hundred head of horses and mules stolen off of the Overland Road. The Captain of our train gave orders to camp and we pulled in about two hundred yards from their camp. The Indians were surly and said if they had ammunition they would clean out the camp. That night there was a guard of two hundred and fifty men surrounding the stock that belonged to the train with all of the wagons inside the guard circle. These Indians had lots of gold coin they had taken from two brothers by the name of Campbell they had murdered on Landers cutoff near Green River. The Campbell brothers were moving a drygoods store from Denver West. The Indians had taken their clothing. Some were wearing white shirts and nothing more. Some had on a hat and a pair of pants.

The next morning we pulled out of camp with about two hundred men as guards for the rear wagons. Our next camp was at Big Wood River. We had to raise our wagon beds to the top of the standards and lash them so the water could not wash them away. Our Frenchman did not lash his wagon bed. I heard an awful screech and looked back to see French woman, wagon bed, and all going down the river.

The current drove the wagon bed ashore and we rescued the frightened woman. By this time on our journey the teams had become so poor and worn out that every article that could be spared was thrown away. The stock that gave out was left beside the road. Many who had started with two and three teams had but one left. We traveled slowly down through big and little Gamas, down Ditto Creek and camped about a mile below where Robert Sproats home now is in Idaho.

We found here the remains of about thirty wagons which had been burned, and the people all murdered by Indians eight years before. On Bowns Creek near the road where the rocks now stand in the flat, was the remains of fifteen or more wagons which had been burned by the Indians and the people murdered.

We traveled on until we reached Boise Valley. This was about the first of September. We got down to about where Middleton now is and tried to find a crossing at an old fording place, but after having one man by the name of Curtis drown we gave up trying to cross there and kept on down the river. At last we found a place we thought we could cross. At this point the river was nearly a mile wide but very still. The first thing to be done was to put twenty-five wagons beds to soak to be used as boats in crossing. The next to take fifty men to the other side to act as guards for the stock as they were put across the river, which were driven in bunches of 50 or 100. As they went in, each man would grab a horses tail with one hand and swim with the other. The wagons had to be all taken apart and ferried across in the wagon beds. After about four days everything was across and loaded in the wagons again. Then we had to ford the Owyhee River which comes in exactly opposite the mouth of the Boise River.

The next stream was the Malheur twenty miles distance. Here we found a company of soldiers with provision train of supplies for the emigrants; these supplies had been sent from Walla Walla and were given out to the needy without cost. From here we went on to Burnt River, a distance of thirty-five miles. This brought us up to the divide overlooking Powder River. We camped several days where Baker City, Oregon, now is. Then we went on to Auburn, a little mining camp twelve miles west. These were the first houses we had seen since the fifth of June and this was September 23rd.

The train broke up at Powder River and scattered to different places in Washington and Oregon. This is a poor attempt to write-up a trip after a lapse of 52 years.

O. B. Slater's trip across the plains in 1862, written as dictated by him February 25, 1915. He died June 5th, 1919, at the age of 71.

O. B. Slater was father-in-law of R. B. Dove of Eugene.