

James C. Tolman Letter to H. P. Graves 1852

transcribed by Ben Truwe

OREGON LETTER.

Table Rock, Rogue River Valley,

Oregon, Sep. 20th, 1852.

H. P. Graves,

My dear old friend:--I am very happy to inform you that we arrived in Yreka, Siskiyou County, Cal., on the 24th of Aug. last, all well, in fine spirits and without any loss of property. Yreka is situated on the Shasta mines, where we left our families some 12 days while we looked at the valley of Shasta and Scott River. These valleys are very fine to look at, but the frost too frequent for raising vegetables, the winter too severe for stock; ascertaining these facts to my satisfaction, I believed I could do better in this valley, and moved in 4 families, viz.: Dr. Coffin, Tenbrook, Geo. Rodgers and myself, crossed the Siskiyou Mountains to this place, distance from Yreka 70 miles. This is a beautiful little valley, well watered and plenty of timber; portions of it rich soil and susceptible of being cultivated. It lays much lower than the two valleys above spoken of, consequently a very mild climate and a fine range for stock everywhere about here. I have got me a claim on a half section of very fine land, 2 miles northeast of and in sight of the town of Table Rock, the only town in this valley.

The Rogue River gold diggings are within 2 miles of my ranch. The diggings were not discovered until last Feb., and could not be worked much on account of the hostility of the Indians, until the water failed in most of the gulches; a few, however, yet afford water for running rockers. As good a proportion of the miners in this vicinity who have water are doing as well as in any mines I have been in. One company of 5 men have been making from \$100 to \$2000 per day, frequently making \$1000 per day. They took out one lump a few days since worth \$1200, and took out the same day over \$600 besides. Every week brings about some new development of more extensive rich diggings in the hills and gulches that surround this valley. Upon the whole, I believe the mines will be lasting in south Oregon and will yield abundantly to the lucky few, while the many poor fellows must ever feel the pains of an empty pocket, go where they may. This valley was commenced being settled last winter, but did not make much headway on account of the Indians, until about 7 weeks ago the settlers and miners had a big fight with them and whipped them out; since that they are very friendly and no doubt will remain so because they can't help themselves.

I am putting up cabins to live in--will have them done this week. I intend to fence and break up ten acres of ground within the next 4 weeks, ready for putting in all kinds of vegetables in Feb. next. There is but little preparation for farming in this valley next year. I don't think any other man will have one-half that much in cultivation, and very few any. Everything in the like of farming pays well. There are 2 gardens in the valley that were attended to and have yielded abundantly. Potatoes 40 cts. and onions 50 cts per pound; everything else in the way of gardening in the same proportion, and is likely to remain so for some time. Flour 23¢ to 25¢ per lb., butter \$1.00 to \$1.50 per lb., according to its freshness; beef 12¢ to 15¢ per lb. &c. &c. What I expect to do after fencing and plowing. Shall pitch into the mines and try my luck again--if I strike it big I shall stick to it until next spring, but in the meantime will have my garden planted, for I am bound to play "Roots awern" [sic--possibly "play roots" on 'em] pretty strong next summer or have it done

Next spring so soon as the waters will admit of it, I expect to undertake an exploring expedition to the coast. From San Francisco to the mouth of the Columbia there are no good ports of entry, nor safe harbors for vessels, a distance of 700 miles, and the few landings have been made are hardly accessible from the country by pack animals. This whole extent of country gets its supplies from these extremes. You must know that something big lies in the middle. Scottsburg will not do: immovable mountains close in until they can only get the town 8 lots wide, and many others in the way. There is a bay discovered I have every reason to believe just above the mouth of Coos River, south of the mouth of Umpqua River, and next thing is to get a road to it and get a foothold. There is said to be a fine country adjoining the bay, but inhabited only by Indians. I intend to make a bold push among the first, for I believe it will pay well and [be] a comfortable place to live. We should have went in this fall, but it was too late to do anything with safety. It may take three months to find a pass to it, but

the Coast Range of mountains are very rugged and hard to pass in the snowy season. I am now in my elements. I am again in a wide and open field for daring enterprise. No little 8 by 10 stove room is necessary to keep warmth in man that blood may circulate in his veins. The surrounding mountains are his only hindrance, and to penetrate them the farthest is one of "man's proudest efforts" here.

The situation of the valleys on the Pacific side: They lay between the Sierra Nevada, Cascade and Coast ranges. The valley of Sacramento in the south, Scott and Shasta valleys north, are separated by the Trinidad Mountains putting up from the Coast Range and connecting with the Sierra Nevada. Scott and Shasta are separated from Rogue River Valley in like manner by the Siskiyou Mountain, and Rogue River and Umpqua valleys by the Umpqua Range of mountains in like manner.

You who have been ever accustomed to seeing endless regions of rich land, susceptible of settlement and cultivation, would pass these valleys by unnoticed, for they are small and wind about through the range of mountains and [are] spotted with small buttes or mounds like islands. The low mountains and buttes are covered with grass as well as the level portion of the valley. Grazing is extensive, also the mining district, while farming land is limited so much so that competition in that line will never bring prices low. Enough about the country and that climate, and I don't suppose you care or are much interested in either.

Now the way we came and how we got here &c. &c.

As I wrote you from Ft. Laramie, we left the Missouri River on the 19th of May, came on 14 wagons in company, followed up the north side of Platte and the usual route to junction of Salt Lake road. There instead of taking Sublette's Cutoff across the 53-mile desert to Green River to Salt Lake road 30 miles to junction of Kinney's Cutoff, took it, crossed Green River and intersected before getting to Hams Fork of same, thence old route to Soda Springs on Bear River and to the junction of the Oregon and California roads. Now I started for Rogue River Valley, Oregon, and it was evident from the geography of the country that it was 300 miles nearer to that part of Oregon by the southern route or the Applegate route than by the northern route to Oregon City. So resolved to take the nearest shot, hit or miss, believing I could go where anyone else could, thence California road to junction Lassen route on Humboldt. There we took the Lassen route to California, as far as Goose Lake, crossing that terrible desert about which so much fuss has been made since '49; we continued the Applegate route northwest to Klamath Lake. There were 14 wagons ahead of us on this route, and at Klamath Lake they took the left, leaving the Oregon road, passing between Shasta Butte and Sheep Rock, striking the head of Shasta Valley, passing down to Yreka, the county seat of the northern county in California. We concluded to take a look at that country too, and followed their trail. We traveled about 70 miles out of our way in coming here and had a worse road, but we got to satisfy ourselves with the country in northern California. Many who took the northern road by Oregon City for this valley have not got in yet. Two or three wagons got in a day or two ago.

As to crossing the plains it is no hardship for me. I would do it once a year for ten years if it were profitable. I enjoyed myself better than I could have done in Iowa, although I performed the most laborious part, viz.: Grass hunter, camp locator and general guide and director for the company. Performed the trip on muleback and necessarily had to ride several miles farther than the noted "Ottumwa Iowa Horse Train." Traveled most every day. I got into that station from necessity--to save my own stock, for there was no one else to do it that seemed to give any satisfaction. Whether I did nor not I don't know nor care, they never complained to me. The train hung together through to Yreka, the only one I know of doing so on the plains this season. I do not think however it was on account of any particular pains that was taken to keep them together, nor any particular LOVE for each other, but some like sheep herded in for fear of danger--while others, dronelike, chimed in with the noise ahead, indifferent to all else. Summing our company all up, they would make a very good average, for we had some as good ones and some as mean ones as could be scared up on the plains, all good enough in their places, but the plains don't suit them.

The "Injuns." We had no trouble with them on the trip, nor lost anything, for we guarded our stock every night from the Mo. River to Yreka. Some companies lost nearly their whole train of animals by not guarding. You will no doubt see accounts in the papers of the great difficulties between the emigrants on our route and the Modoc Indians, situated at Tule Lake on the sink of Lost River, 20 miles below the natural bridge. They had committed some depredations on those that preceded us a day or two, by killing a few scattered men and giving hard battle to the main company, wounding 2 or 3 of them. A pack company of 8 men in our rear 1 or 2 days were surrounded and killed, save one man. Another train of wagons were surrounded by the Indians; some 3 or

4 fine men from Yreka, who had went out to meet the emigrants, were killed, but the train was rescued by Ben Wright, a celebrated Indian fighter, and his party of whites and Shasta Indians. Ben pitched in, shot down some 18 or 20 Modocs, pursued the army through the tules to the lake where they took canoes, and then he raked them from stem to bow, canoes upsetting, squaws and papooses floating about in the lake, and a noted Indian of Ben's party, named Swill, swam in and commenced a war of extermination. Caught every squaw and papoose he could get sight of, put them under and held them there until drowned. They are still fighting them and will exterminate them if possible. The Modocs are some 5 or 600 strong, and have a cave in a rock butte, situated in the center of the marsh where they retreat to whenever pursued. The cave is thought to be one mile in length, well furnished with provisions, water and munitions of war of their kind. The entrance is small and cannot be passed on account of the shower of arrows let loose by those devils that occupy that pit. Ben Wright had them in there some two weeks last winter; tried to smoke them out, couldn't do it. He says if he can run them all in again he can save [sic] them. I think he intends to drill a hole through the rock overhead and blast them out, then kill them as they attempt to make their escape. We met a party of some 16 men from Yreka, at Goose Lake, 2 of whom returned with us, and from one of them, a Mr. Fraim, we ascertained the precise location of the Indians. Knowing our situation, having 6 or 7 families, a large amount of stock and only about ten well-armed men that would do to aid in a fight. I told Mr. Fraim we must defeat them by stratagem. I could not make a single man realize the fact that there was any danger of a fight, and if it did come off it would be unexpected and confusion would follow. The Indians were concealed in 2 parties, one in the rocks, and the other in the tules ahead. The road as usually traveled passed close by the side of those in the rocks. before arriving at their hiding place, we took to the right, passed them unnoticed and was near up to the band in the tules before they discovered us. When they seen us they came in hot pursuit. It would have done you good to see some of our brave Indian fighters look wild. The cry of stop and help us; drive them Indians back, they will overtake us--lets us ascertain what they mean. Ahead one-half mile we had to make a narrow pass and then the upper band. We crowded on, drove those back in the tules, and gained the advantage of the ground and passed secure by where they could not get to us without exposing themselves in the open field; that they were afraid to do. We then played the bluff game on them. They said they did not want to fight. Why? Because we had gained an advantage over them in the ground. Their warriors were sticking up as thick as cornstalks on the rocks, springing their bows and throwing themselves into all kinds of postures, whooping and yelling like a thousand coyotes. Had I stopped when nearly all wanted to (and to stop their soliciting I had to use some rough language) we would have been surrounded and cut off beyond a doubt. The plans of the Indians were as plain as day, and they could all see them after it was all over. Every company that have been caught there have been out-managed. Mr. Fraim and myself agreed precisely on the plan of operating, and he played a good part in the tules while I led the train at a proper distance from the rocks. Some of our boys were cool and decided, while others--. There was several in that didn't belong to Ottumwa; fell in with on the way.

So ends the trip. As all are writing it will be unnecessary for me to speak of their affairs. As you are aware I left Oskaloosa with 3 wagons, 2 horses and 5 mules. Well, I traded off one horse for mules, sold the Jim horse I got from Mudge. I arrived at Yreka with the same 3 mares and the same 5 mules and six other mules and 4 wagons and am out for the additional 6 mules and one wagon \$240, all honest fair trading. I am offered \$900 for 6 of my mules, but they will be worth \$1200 when fat. My stock, 14 head, came through in good condition. My mares are worth \$200 each, will not sell any until spring.

Give my respects to all friends, and show this letter to Mr. Comer; if he is not there write to him, also to Silas and Mr. Leighton and my wife's people, for I shall not have time to write any more for one month at least. Direct to Oregon City, Oregon. City is some 270 miles north of this. Give my respects to Dr. Warden, Mudge and all friends; tell them I will write in due time. Emily sends her love to all; she is well, perfectly satisfied and happy. Tell the little girls not to marry until they get here; I will ensure them husbands.

Very respectfully yours,  
JAMES C. TOLMAN.

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