

Keturah (Penton) Belknap

Pioneer of 1848

Excerpts from her diary



The Keturah Belknap diary starts with her marriage in 1839 and documents events in their family life from that point, through their various moves, and ends in 1848 at Fort Hall. A complete transcript is available through the Oregon Historical Society. It was also published by the University of Nebraska Press in “Covered Wagon Women, Diaries and Letters From The Western Trails, 1840-1849” edited and compiled by Kenneth L. Holmes.

The following are excerpts that are of interest to those following the 1848 emigration.

Starting in the middle of November 1847, Keturah began to sew additional clothing for the family, as well as making up linen for a wagon cover and sacks for their essentials. The men were kept busy making ox yokes and bows for the wagon covers.

“Will make a muslin cover for the wagon as we will have to double cover so we can keep warm and dry; put the muslin on first and then the heavy linen one for strength. They both have to be sewed real good and strong and I have to spin the thread and sew all these long seams with my fingers, then I have to make a new feather tick for my bed. I will put the feathers of two beds into one tick and sleep on it.”

“I think we are fixed very comfortable for the trip. There is quite a train of connection. Father Belknap [Jesse Belknap] has one wagon and 4 yoke of oxen; Hayley [I believe this is actually Hawley] has two wagons and 8 yoke of oxen; Newton about the same; Uncle John Starr has two wagons and 4 yoke of oxen; G.W. Bethards one wagon and 3 yoke of oxen; we have the same besides 3 horses and 10 cows.”

“Monday, April 9th, 1848. I am the first one up; breakfast is over; our wagon is backed up to the steps; we will load at the hind end and shove the things in front. The first thing is a big box that will just fit in the wagon bed. That will have the bacon, salt and various other things; then it will be covered with a cover made of light boards nailed on two pieces of inch plank about 3 inches wide. This will serve us for a table, there is a hole in each corner and we have sticks sharpened at one end so they will stick in the ground; then we put the box cover on, slip the legs in the holes and we have a nice table, then when it is on the box George will sit on it and let his feet hang over and drive the team. It is just as high as the wagon bed. Now we will put in the old chest that is packed with our clothes and things we will want to wear and use on the way. The till is the medicine chest; then there will be cleats fastened to the bottom of the wagon bed to keep things from slipping out of place. Now there is a vacant clear across that will be large enough to set a chair; will set it with the back against the side of wagon bed; there I will ride. On the other side will be a vacancy where little Jessie can play. He has a few toys and some marbles and some sticks for whip stocks, some blocks for oxen and I tie a string on the stick and he uses my work basket for a covered wagon and plays going to Oregon....The next thing is a box as high as the chest that is packed with a few dishes and things we wont need till we get thru. And now we will put in the long

sacks of flour and other things. The sacks are made of home made linen and will hold 125 pounds; 4 sacks of flour and one of corn meal. Now comes the groceries. We will make a wall of smaller sacks stood on end; dried apples and peaches, beans, rice, sugar and coffee, the latter being in a green state. We will brown it in the skillet as we use it. Everything must be put in strong bags; no paper wrappings for the trip. There is a corner left for the wash tub and the lunch basket will just fit in the tub. The dishes we want to use will all be in the basket. I am going to start with good earthen dishes and if they get broken have tin ones to take their place. I have made 4 nice little table cloths so am going to live just like I was at home. Now we will fill the other corner with pick-ups. The iron-ware that I will want to use every day will go in a box on the hind end of the wagon like a feed box. Now we are all loaded but the bed.....I will level up the sacks with some extra bedding, then there is a side of sole leather that will go on first, then two comforts and we have a good enough bed for anyone to sleep on.”

“Tuesday, April 10, 1848.....Now for the bed (feather); nicely folded the two ends together, lay it on the sacks, then I fix it. The covers are folded and the pillows laid smoothly on, reserving one for the outside so if I or the little boy get sleepy we have a good place to lie; the others are covered with a heavy blanket and now my chair and the churn and we will be all done.”

“Our wagon is ready to start; I get in the wagon and in my chair busy with some unfinished work.....Uncle John Starr(‘s) two (wagons) are the last so they will be behind today. We will take them in after we get a mile on the road at their place. Now we roll out. Father B(elknap) is on the lead on old Nelly; Bart is driving the team; Cory is on our old Lige driving the loose stock. Our wagon is No. 2, G.W. Bethers No. 3, J.W. Starr No. 4. Uncle Prather two wagons, Chatman Hawley two wagons and I think they all had one horse but Uncle John Starr. He had two yoke of oxen to each wagon; one wagon was a very shaky old thing. They had their provisions in it and when they get it lightened up they would put everything in one wagon and leave the old shack by the road side. They started with a family of eight and had to take in an old man to drive one team.”

“April 22nd...Are nearing the Missouri River.....Mr. Jackson’s voice is heard. He says if we stay it will break the Sabbath worse than if we go on so we all started but had only gone about 5 miles when a little boy was run over by the wagon and instantly killed. We then stopped and buried the child. We were near a settlement so it was not left there alone.”

The train reached the Missouri River on that Wednesday and found the river running high. Some of the train were able to cross, but the Watts stayed behind to wait until the Jacksons could get over the river. The rest of the train continued on.

After arriving at the Platte River, the company held up, did some repair work on the wagons and formed a company and made some laws.

“This morning the roll is called and every one is expected to answer to his name. They have quite a time with the election of officers. Every man wants an office. George Jackson and Joe Watts are pilots; they have both been over the road before and have camping places noted down so now we take the trail again.”

“We have been on the route till its got to be June; all days about the same. We will now go down the noted Ash Hollow and strike the Sweet River, then will rest awhile.....We will stay here all night. I wash

a little and cook some more; have a ham bone and beans. This is good sweet water; we have had alkali and nothing was good. Just as we were ready to sit down to supper Joe Meek and his posse of men rode into camp. They were going to Washington, D.C. to get the government to send soldiers to protect the settlers in Oregon and they told us all about the Indian Massacre at Walla Walla called 'The Whitman Massacre'. They had traveled all winter and some of their men had died and they got out of food and had to eat mule meat so we gave them all their supper and breakfast. Father B. was captain so he and George took three so they made way with most all my stuff I had cooked up; on the whole we are having quite a time; some want to turn back and others are telling what they would do in case of an attack.

While writing a letter to send east with the Meek party, Keturah becomes witness to an argument going on in an adjoining wagon.

"George is out on guard and in the next wagon behind ours a man and woman are quarreling. She wants to turn back and he wont go so she says she will go and leave him with the children and he will have a good time with that crying baby, then he used some very bad words and said he would put it out of the way. Just then I heard a muffled cry and a heavy thud as tho something was thrown against the wagon box and she said 'Oh, you've killed it' and he swore some more and told her to keep her mouth shut or he would give her some of the same. Just then the word came, change guards. George came in and Mr. Kittridge went out so he and his wife were parted for the night. The baby was not killed. I write this to show how easy we can be deceived."

The next morning *"the woman was out by the road side with a little buget (?) and her baby asleep in the wagon under a strong opiate. After that we had trouble with those folks as long as they were with us; they would take things from those that did the most for them and there were others of the same stripe. They seemed to think when they got on the plains they were out of reach of the law of God or man."*

"it is the 4th of July. While some are getting over [the Green River] they have got out anvils and are celebrating The Fourth. The Jacksons are doing their best to entertain the crowd; there is three of them.

Several days before arriving at Fort Hall, Joseph Watts and his sheep pulled out and fell behind. According to Keturah, *"I got the blame for the split. The old Mother Watts said after they got thru 'Yes, Geo. Belknap's wife is a little woman but she wore the pants on that train', so I came into notoriety before I knew it..."*

The company arrived at Fort Hall after taking Greenwood's cutoff and at that point the commentary ceases. From Fort Hall they crossed the Blue Mountains and went down the Columbia River to The Dalles, At that point the women and children went by river to Portland while some of the men took the stock and oxen by trail. They continued on to Benton County where they settled and raised their families.



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