

**The 1854 Meeker Wagon Train**  
**by Dennis M. Larsen**  
**September 15, 2021**

*Based on the contemporary diaries and letters of Anna Maria Goodell, Elizabeth Austin, Winfield Scott Ebey, and Thomas Spencer; reminiscences of Ezra Meeker, Maria Angelina Burr, Margaret Whitesell, and Jacob P. Prickett; and research by Ken Keigley, a direct descendant of John Valentine Meeker, Ezra Meeker's brother, Lisa M. Carle, a direct descendant of Oliver Meeker, Ezra Meeker's brother, and the author.*

Ezra Meeker's name is paired in history with the Oregon Trail—first for his 1852 trip west over it and second for his 1905-1928 crusades to commemorate the trail and the pioneers who traversed the continent. But there was another Meeker who actually traveled the trail twice, once in 1852 with Ezra and again in 1854 bringing the remainder of the Meeker clan to Washington Territory. Oliver Meeker, Ezra's older brother, gets little notice for this unusual feat. On April 24, 1852 Oliver, Ezra, Eliza Jane and infant son Marion Meeker started west from Eddyville, Iowa.<sup>1</sup> However there was a girl, left behind in Eddyville, who had apparently caught Oliver's eye. The 1850 census listed the family of Walter and Melinda Clement living in Eddyville. Their daughter, Amanda, was just thirteen years old in the spring of 1852, too young to marry even by the standards of that time. So Oliver traveled west with his married brother as a single man.

The emigrants arrived in Portland, Oregon, on October 1, 1852. Here Ezra found lodging for an exhausted Eliza Jane while he spent a few days earning a much-needed \$40.00 loading the bark *Mary Melville*.

A week later Ezra received word that Oliver had found them work as managers of a boarding house in the nearby town of St. Helens, Oregon, where some sixty workers were staying while building a dock for the new city that hoped to be the terminus of a steamship line from San Francisco. Ezra described this as the best hotel room in town. The work building the dock continued until January 1853 when word came that the steamship company had given up on St. Helens as a potential terminus and had thrown their lot in with Portland. Work on the dock ceased and the boarders scattered leaving the Meekers looking for a new occupation and a new home.

On January 20 Ezra staked his first claim and, with Oliver's help, began building a cabin along the banks of the Columbia River at the site of the future city of Kalama, Washington. By February they were clearing land and planting potatoes and other crops.

Always looking for funds, the two brothers took advantage of a spring flood and collected as many as they could of the numerous logs that were washed by the cabin. They added to their collection by felling some of the nearby 250-foot tall fir trees and

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<sup>1</sup> "Iowa to the Land of Gold," Eliza Ann McAuley diary. Edited and Compiled by Kenneth L. Holmes, *Covered Wagon Women*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 33-81.

using their oxen, Buck and Dandy, to drag them down to the river. An inexperienced Ezra nearly killed himself when two of the giants they were working on fell almost simultaneously and came close to crushing him. After seven weeks of hard work the brothers had a raft of logs ready to float downriver to a sawmill about twenty miles distant at Oak Point, west of today's Longview. Sometime in March they pushed off, riding their pile of logs, expecting to leave Eliza Jane and baby Marion alone at the cabin just over night, but the Columbia River had a different agenda. The current was so strong that the brothers were simply swept past the mill they had contracted with. To compound matters Ezra nearly drowned falling into the river with his boots on. The brothers were unable to stop until they reached Astoria, at the mouth of the Columbia River, where they sold their logs at the sawmill located there for a healthy \$800.00 profit. This enabled them to buy flour and potatoes and other needed supplies to take back to Eliza Jane and Marion, but the planned overnight adventure had turned into a week and the two brothers received a chilly reception when they got home.

April brought word of the formation of Washington Territory, the focus of which would be Puget Sound. It seemed to the restless Meekers that prospects for the future might be better farther north. So at the end of May Oliver and Ezra made their way to Puget Sound where they spent a month exploring the area by canoe. While they were gone Eliza Jane cared for Marion and tended the garden. The explorers decided to file a claim on land on McNeil Island, three miles across the sound from the village of Steilacoom. After an absence of a month, Ezra left Oliver at Olympia and returned home. He came with glowing reports of life on the Sound and news of the new claim on a picturesque island and of the cabin, which Oliver was supposedly at that moment building.

After a rather rough journey Ezra, Eliza Jane and Marion arrived in Tumwater where they set their tent. The new island home meant Ezra could not transport the oxen there, thus Buck and Dandy were sold and a canoe rented in their place. Two days paddling brought the family to McNeil Island, but they found no Oliver and no cabin, just a raft of logs tied up and floating in the bay. And no skiff. At a loss, Ezra paddled across the Sound to Steilacoom where he found the skiff tied up at the town dock, but there was no sign of Oliver anywhere and no one knew where he was. Asking around, Ezra located the provisions that Oliver had stored, loaded them in Oliver's skiff, and returned to McNeil Island towing the canoe. Once again the tent was pitched. The next morning Oliver paddled across the channel in a canoe. He had been earning needed cash loading a ship.

The Meekers put in 18-hour days building a cabin, complete with a wooden floor and glass windows. It was located on the south side of the bight or lagoon, just above the high tide line, near where the penitentiary stands today just across the sound from Steilacoom. Here they received a letter from their father, Jacob Meeker, stating, **"Boys, if Oliver will come back to cross with us, we will go to Oregon next year."**

Oliver jumped at the opportunity. A journey west would start at Eddyville. Unmarried Oliver no doubt had Amanda Clement in mind. She would be two years older by the time he got to Iowa and of marriageable age. Later events suggest it was likely he sent a letter in advance broaching the subject. The Meekers shuttered their island cabin and Ezra and

Oliver went to work at the Tullis brothers' sawmill in Tumwater earning eleven dollars a day. Eliza set up housekeeping there in a tent. She kept the brothers well fed and nourished with huckleberry pudding, white bread, meat and vegetables. The Kalama claim, cabin and the unharvested potato crop were sold to a Mr. Davenport for \$400.00. Soon funds enough were secured to send Oliver east. Ezra said that they

*"... succeeded in getting money enough together to pay the passage of the elder brother to Iowa. And what a trip. Over to the Columbia River, out from there by steamer to San Francisco, then to the Isthmus, then New York, after which by rail as far west as there was a railroad and then the walk to Eddyville, Iowa, from where the start was again to be made."*<sup>2</sup>

Ezra supplied neither dates nor further details about this remarkable journey. However we find one intriguing entry in the *Alta California* newspaper of February 7, 1854 that gives us a starting point with which to unravel the story. We are told by the newspaper that the steamship *Peytona* sailed from Astoria on the Columbia River on February 2, 1854 and arrived in San Francisco on February 7. There is a list of the arriving passengers. Among the many names is a person identified simply as "Meeker." No first name is given. Was this person Oliver Meeker on his way east in response to his father's letter?

Ezra said in *Pioneer Reminiscences* that Oliver left for the Columbia River before the birth of his eldest daughter, Ella, but he didn't say how much before. Ella Meeker was born on February 26, 1854, which tells us Oliver was on his way sometime before that date.

The steamship *Peytona* began running between Portland and San Francisco on December 28, 1853 and made the round trip thereafter roughly every two weeks. Stories about the *Peytona's* sailings and connections with steamers to the Isthmus of Panama and Nicaragua began to appear regularly in the *Weekly Oregonian* in late December 1853. Advertisements began in the *Olympia Pioneer and Democrat* starting February 11, 1854 and continued weekly after that date. If Oliver was on the February 2 sailing he needed to have learned of it from a source other than the *Pioneer and Democrat*. What would that source be? Ezra said in *Pioneer Reminiscences* that the walls of his cabin on McNeil Island were covered with copies of the New York newspaper to which he subscribed. It does not seem a stretch to suggest that there were also some Portland newspapers on those walls with information about the *Peytona*.

If Oliver is "Meeker" he likely left McNeil Island in late January and made his way to the Columbia River where he boarded the *Peytona*. There were several ways he could have done this. He could have traveled by horse over the Cowlitz Trail to Monticello (present day Longview) and from that point crossed the Columbia and on to Portland. Oliver was familiar with the trail having crossed over it that spring. The steamer *Fashion* was also running twice weekly from Cowlitz Landing to Portland offering yet another possibility. Finally, a number of cargo vessels were in Puget Sound that winter. Any one of them

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<sup>2</sup> Ezra Meeker, *The Busy Life of Eighty Five Years*, pp118-120.

could have been stopping at a Columbia River port and some of them carried a few passengers.

Whatever the method of travel, the Portland newspapers suggest that Oliver had an interesting trip. In late January a very unusual cold snap struck the northwest. By January 21 *the Weekly Oregonian* was reporting that the Columbia River was entirely frozen over. A week later it was telling its readers that it was now possible to walk across the Willamette River on the ice and that the *Peytona*, the *Lot Whitcomb*, the *Fashion*, the *Fire-Fly*, and the *Eagle* were being made fast to their moorings and being protected from the ice that was expected to go downstream to the ocean in a rush when the cold snap broke. The Olympia paper reported the Cowlitz River was frozen and all communication with Portland severed. It took the *Peytona* ten days to reach Portland after entering the Columbia River. She finally tied up at the city wharf on Tuesday, January 31. (A typical run for the steamer from Astoria to Portland was from six to eight hours.) Around January 29 the weather changed. The wind shifted from the north to out of the south and it started raining. The ice broke and river traffic again started moving. On Thursday February 2 the *Peytona* departed Portland bound for San Francisco. That evening it cleared the Columbia bar. Five days later she docked at San Francisco and “Meeker” disembarked.

The excerpt following is from a letter in the collection of the Puyallup Historical Society at the Meeker Mansion written by Oliver’s grandson and gives us a few more details about Oliver’s journey.

*Oliver took the steamer down the coast to Panama, walked across the Isthmus of Panama & from the Atlantic side took a steamer to New York, thence by train west to where the old folks lived.*

Assuming Oliver arrived in San Francisco on the *Peytona* on February 7, according to the shipping advertisements in the *Alta California* newspaper, he would have been stuck there for a week. The first advertised sailing from San Francisco to Panama was on February 14. A Pacific Mail Steamship company steamer sailed on that date connecting with French Trans-Atlantic Company ships for St. Nazaire, France and an unnamed ship of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company to New York. The Pacific Mail Company had three ships running the San Francisco-Panama route—the *Cortez*, *Sonora* and *Oregon*. The advertisement does not mention which ship was sailing on Feb 14. First cabin fare to New York was \$315, second cabin fare was \$270 and steerage was \$200.

Oliver’s second choice would have been the Independent Line steamship *Uncle Sam* departing San Francisco February 16 connecting with the steamship *Yankee Blade* direct for New York.

The run from San Francisco to Panama was about twelve days. The fare from San Francisco to New York included passage across the Isthmus of Panama. In February of 1854 you took a mule or walked the first 16 miles and then connected with the railroad for the last 40 miles. It took 20 hours to get across the Isthmus. The run from Panama to New York was eight days. If all went well the entire passage from San Francisco to New

York could be done in three weeks.

Once in New York City Oliver could have taken a train all the way to Rock Island, Illinois on the Mississippi River for \$27 with several connections. The railroad reached Rock Island on February 22, 1854. (Oliver would not have known he could take a train this far before he left Puget Sound. He probably anticipated a much longer walk.)

From Rock Island on the Mississippi River it was less than 150 miles to Eddyville. Oliver could have walked the distance in about ten to twelve days. He also had the option of taking a steamer to Eddyville, but that would have meant more money and Ezra said he walked from the end of the railroad to Eddyville. We know for certain that Oliver was in Eddyville on April 23, 1854, as he married Amanda Clement that day. If all went well he could have reached Eddyville as early as March 15-20.

But his grandson told a different story. The following excerpt is from a letter in the collection of the Puyallup Historical Society at the Meeker Mansion written by Oliver's grandson Oliver Wells Meeker and gives us a slightly alternate history.

*Oliver persuaded the whole family to sell out and come west by ox team. It was then that Oliver's & Amanda's romance took place. On their way to the "jumping off spot" in Missouri, where the wagons and ox teams were outfitted and the wagon trains organized for the trip, over night stops were made at farm houses, and where there had been some prior acquaintance, this was utilized where possible. At any rate, the Meekers stopped over night at the home of the Clements and Oliver and Amanda, the 15 year-old daughter of the Clements fell in love in the one evening they had. In the morning Oliver went to the girl's parents and proposed that they be married and he offered to leave her at the altar and make the trip west & when he had a suitable home established for her, he would then come back for her. The Parents asked Amanda if she was willing to be married & then wait for him & she said "yes". Then the parents decided that the best thing would be for them to marry, but for Amanda to go west with Oliver & help with establishing that home.*  
*Oliver [Wells] Meeker*

Young Oliver likely heard this story from his grandmother who lived in the same household for a number of years. There would have been ample opportunity for Amanda to tell the story, in person, of her courtship, marriage, and journey over the Oregon Trail. It's impossible to say whether she or her grandson added the flourishes and mixed up some of the facts.

Firstly, Oliver was there, at his father's request, to guide them. For another, it took little account of the Meekers' previous 1852 acquaintance with the Clements. It seems unlikely that a one-evening romance would lead to such a hasty marriage of such a young bride. It is more likely, based on the previous acquaintance, that the groundwork was laid in advance through correspondence. Ezra said that Oliver walked from the end of the railroad to Eddyville "from where the start was again to be made." What did he mean by this? Had the entire Meeker family moved from Marion County, Indiana, to Eddyville

prior to 1854? Or were they all simply meeting in Eddyville?

There were two Meeker siblings living in Eddyville in March 1854. John Valentine Meeker had been there since 1851. He lived in Eddyville until 1859 when he too moved to Washington Territory.<sup>3</sup> His first child was born there. He was also likely acquainted with Walter Clement through his work as a teacher and membership in the local I. O. O. F. (Independent Order of Odd Fellows) chapter. And Hannah Jane Meeker married Jesse Dunlap there on March 30, 1854.<sup>4</sup> The newspaper's wedding announcement said, "Hannah Meeker of Eddyville," suggesting she had been living there for some time. That left only the parents, Jacob and Phoebe, and the youngest brother Clark Meeker unaccounted for. It is very likely the entire family was in Eddyville for both Hannah's wedding on March 30 and Oliver's wedding on April 23. If that was the case, much of Oliver's grandson's letter got the story wrong. Oliver would have had nearly a month to court Amanda while the family was finishing organizing and packing for the journey west. The only part of that story that is believable is Oliver's discussion with the parents. Considering that Oliver and Amanda likely met in 1852, and then possibly corresponded, a more "mature" Amanda had some time to look Oliver over in person before she made her final decision. The obituary of Lulu Packard, who was a member of the wagon train, stated the "young people started May 1," suggesting that a week passed after Amanda's wedding before they actually departed Eddyville.<sup>5</sup>

So we know there was a Meeker rendezvous in Eddyville, most likely for Hannah's wedding on March 30, and a month later the start west was made. Oliver may have traveled from Indiana to Eddyville with his parents and brother Clark or he may have gone on ahead alone to Eddyville. His grandson's letter suggests that he traveled with "a Meeker party" to Eddyville. The two couples spent their honeymoons journeying on the Oregon Trail to Puget Sound where they arrived in Steilacoom between October 19 and October 22.<sup>6</sup>

## **The Journey West**

In 1852 it took Ezra and Oliver seventeen days to travel from Eddyville to Council Bluffs. They then spent four or five days in that city making final arrangements and purchases before ferrying across the Missouri River. It seems logical that Jacob's party would follow the same route, especially as he had Oliver to guide them. And we have a detailed description of that route courtesy of Eliza McCauley's 1852 diary. There was a ferry at Eddyville that crossed the Des Moines River. The fare was 75 cents a wagon.

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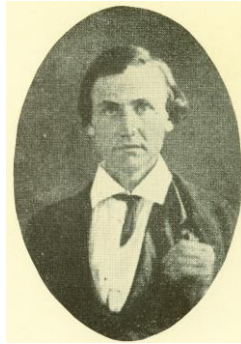
<sup>3</sup> "Sketch of the Life of John Valentine Meeker," *Tacoma Ledger*, October 19, 1912.

<sup>4</sup> "Hymeneal," *Eddyville Free Press*, April 6, 1854, pg2

<sup>5</sup> *Morning Oregonian*, October 28, 1912; reprinted as "George H. Himes Gives Life Story Of Pioneer Family," *Washington Standard*, December 13, 1912, pg1. Lulu seems to have been a nickname. She passed it along to her youngest daughter as a given name.

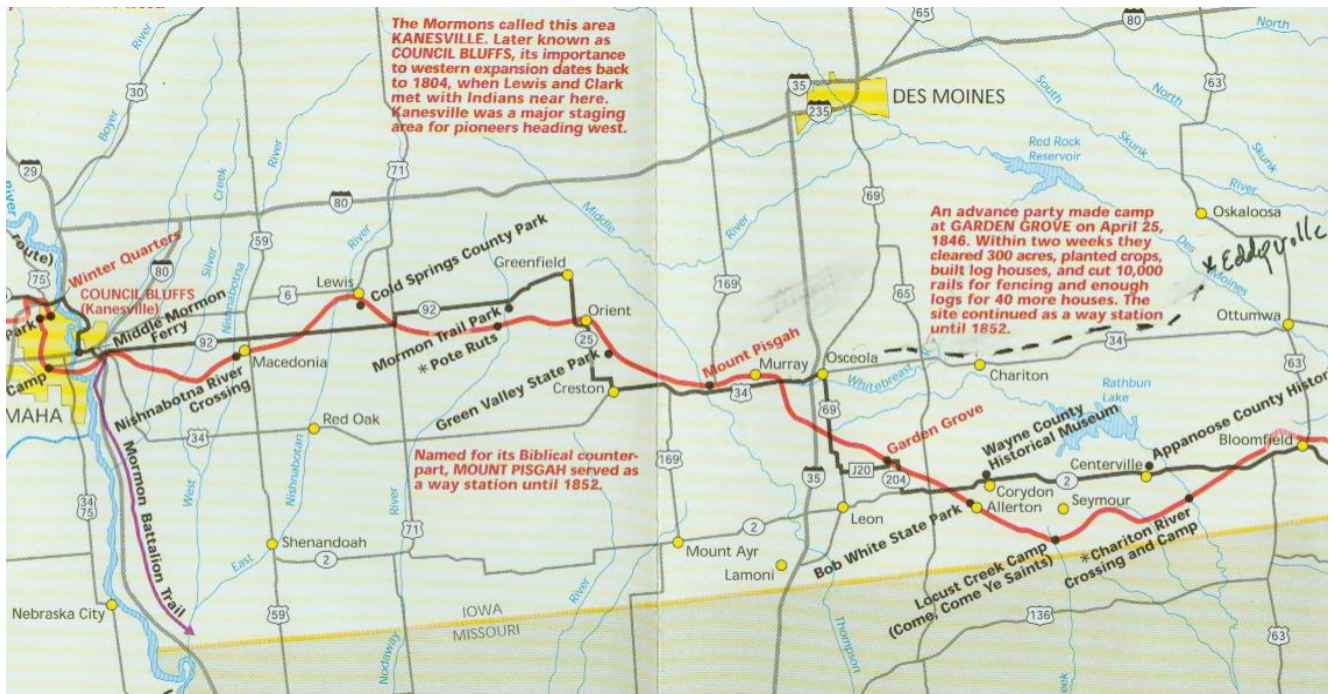
<sup>6</sup> Lulu Packard's obituary said they arrived October 19; Her husband's Donation Land Claim document said October 20, Oliver and Amanda's document said they arrived October 22; Jacob Meeker's said he arrived October 20, as did Jesse Dunlap's.

From there the wagons angled southwest, until they hit the route of today's U.S. Highway 34. They continued west to the town of Murray and the intersection with the Mormon Trace of 1846. From here they followed the Mormon Trace to Council Bluffs and the Missouri River.



**Oliver Meeker**

From the Goodell, Austin and Ebey diaries that state they crossed the Missouri River on May 18, we can estimate the Meeker party that was one or two days behind crossed the Missouri around May 19.



**Route Meeker wagon train followed across Iowa**

**Meeker Wagon Train Members:**

Jacob Redding Meeker—age 50  
Phoebe Shaw Baker Meeker—age 53

Oliver Meeker—age 26  
Amanda Clement Meeker—age 15

Jesse Dunlap—age 30  
Hannah Jane Meeker Dunlap—age 19

John A. Packard—age 33 (Bonney, *History of Pierce County*, page 124)  
Lulu M. Packard—age 30 (*Pioneer Reminiscences*, page 114)

Usual Clark Meeker—age 17

Thomas Spencer—age 20

The following people/families were with the Meeker train when it joined the Vermillion party on May 26<sup>th</sup>, but we do not know when or where they joined the Meeker train.

C. P. Anderson and family—Goodell and Austin simply call them Mr. and Mrs. Anderson. Bancroft in his *History of Washington* supplied the initials. The Andersons traveled with the Meekers from May 29<sup>th</sup> until July 1<sup>st</sup>, when they sprinted ahead.

Mr. Hammond—disappeared while searching for missing cattle on June 7<sup>th</sup> and was never found. It was believed that Indians captured him.

Mr. Wright—confusing, as there was a nine-year-old James Wright with the Ebey train. The Meeker train's Mr. Wright seems to have arrived with the Andersons and left when they departed.

An unidentified African-American family (Goodell and Austin) whose names we never learn.

Ezra mentions all the Meeker family members (and Lulu Packard) above in *Pioneer Reminiscences* except Hannah and Jesse. It is indisputable that Jesse and Hannah were in Eddyville in March 1854 and in Washington Territory by the end of the year. Jacob P. Prickett encountered Oliver Meeker at Devil's Gate, Wyoming, on July 6, 1854. According to Prickett Oliver told him, "That his father, mother, brother, and sister were emigrating . . . to Oregon, and had camped the previous night at the upper end of The Devil's Gate."<sup>7</sup> Oliver had just one sister, Hannah. William Bonney on page 123 of his *History of Pierce County* identifies Jesse Dunlap as one of the eighty-four who took out a donation land claim before the law expired at the end of 1854. A close reading of the

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<sup>7</sup> "In Quest of Gold: Reminiscences of An Overland Trip to California Half a Century Ago, Crossing the Plains" By a Gold-Seeker (aka Jacob P. Prickett), *Milford [Indiana] Mail*, Nov 21 & 28, 1901, p8 c1-3.

many pages of that document confirms that the Dunlaps arrived in Washington on October 20, 1854.<sup>8</sup> Census records indicate that Hannah gave birth to a child in Washington Territory in 1855. There is also a photograph in Ezra's book of all the living Pierce County survivors of the 1855-56 Indian wars. Ezra doesn't identify the people in the photograph. However the same photograph appears in the University of Washington archives and in Weldon Rau's book about Willis Boatman. Both identify the woman sitting next to Eliza Jane Meeker as Mrs. Dunlap. In a 1920 interview with the *Tacoma Ledger* Ezra stated that his father had three ox teams when he met his wagon train in 1854, suggesting teams for Jacob, Oliver, and the Dunlaps.<sup>9</sup>

#### **THE VERMILION WAGON TRAIN MEMBERS:**

William Bird Goodell—age 25

Anna Maria Goodell—age 22

Frederick Augustus Goodell (Freddie) —age five months

Elizabeth Austin—age 27

Charles P. Judson—age 48

Louisa Judson—age 44

Lucretia Judson—daughter, age unknown

Charles Van Wormer—age 35, later settled in Lynden, WA (Robert E. Hawley, *Skqee Mus, or Pioneer Days on the Nooksack*, Bellingham, 1945 p. 185)

Mary Ann Van Wormer—age 27 and their three children

Ebenezer Hardy—age 21

The Vermilion party crossed the Missouri River on May 18. The Meeker train caught up with and camped next to them on the evening of May 26 at a location due north of today's Central City, Nebraska, and just south of the Loup Fork River. The Meekers traveled with the Vermilion wagon train from May 26 until June 17. The five women, four men and four children of the Vermilion train had come from Vermilion, Ohio, on the shores of Lake Erie just west of Cleveland. Even though the Meekers had long lived in Indiana, they hailed originally from southern Ohio and, no doubt, the two groups found much common news to share. Anna Maria Goodell and Elizabeth Austin's diaries chronicle the twenty-three days the trains traveled together through Nebraska.

Through the diaries we learn that Phoebe Meeker took ill with cholera near Chimney Rock. The Meekers halted for two days just over the Wyoming border. Mrs. Meeker died

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<sup>8</sup> The index book of Donation Land Claims lists the Dunlap's arrival as November 20. When you look at the original handwritten document it notes in several places an October 20 arrival. In only one place is November 20 listed. It is the author's belief that was simply an error by the person who was writing that particular page in 1854.

<sup>9</sup> "Traces His Trail of 66 Years Ago," *Tacoma Ledger*, July 19, 1920.

there. Word of her death reached the Vermilion wagon train, which had gone ahead seven miles and camped. The two women's diaries noted Phoebe's death as occurring either on the night of June 18 or in the morning of June 19. There are no descriptions of her burial. The Meekers fell behind the now combined Ebey/Vermilion wagon train and did not catch up to them again. Anna Goodell made one last mention of the Meeker company on June 27 when she noted they were a day's travel behind. At this point they were approaching today's Casper, Wyoming. Ironically, two days after Phoebe Meeker died, Goodell and Austin witnessed the death and burial of David Solomon Burr and commented on the grieving widow who would in the not too distant future become Jacob Meeker's second wife. The Meekers were not yet finished with death. At Devil's Gate the youngest of the clan, eighteen-year old Clark Meeker drowned in the Sweetwater River.<sup>10</sup>

The following are the journal entries of the diarists covering the twenty-three days that the Meeker Company traveled through Nebraska.

May 26 Friday

[Goodell] ***Mr. Meekers company camped just behind us. They are an Oregon company and we are going in company with them.***

May 27 Saturday

[Goodell] ***We joined the Meeker company this morning. Camped on the prairie where there is neither water or grass. It rains very hard. It has thundered very hard. The Andersons have camped about one-half mile behind us. There is a darky in the company. He got his cattle in a mud hole and had a fine time getting them out.***

[Austin] *Today we traveled over sand hills 15 or 20 miles, passed 3 more graves. The men overtook us this afternoon that went in pursuit of the stolen horses but found nothing of the horses or Indians; rained all afternoon.*

May 28 Sunday

[Goodell] *It is a very lonesome and dreary day. It rains hard by spells. We have crossed Prairie Creek and two or three other small ones. The mud was very deep. Part of our company are behind us someways. We have camped on Wood River. There is plenty of wood and water.*

[Austin] *It is very rainy today; have just passed Prairie Creek—a very bad place; afternoon & still rains very hard; passed one grave this forenoon.*

May 29 Monday

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<sup>10</sup> "In Quest of Gold: Reminiscences of An Overland Trip to California Half a Century Ago, Crossing the Plains" By a Gold-Seeker (aka Jacob P. Prickett), *Milford [Indiana] Mail*, Nov 21 & 28, 1901, p8 c1-3. "Mail Matters," *Eddyville Free Press*, December 29, 1854, p2, col 5.

[Goodell] *Today most everything is going on. Most of them are washing and baking. Mary is washing and Lib and Lucretia are baking. Some of the men in the camp are shooting, some swearing, some playing on the fiddle and some on the accordion and flute. There is a little of everything. **The Andersons have just come up and camped here. They are going to form a company for Oregon tonight.***

[Austin] *Today we spent at Wood River and washed and baked; very rainy and wet. Thundered and lightened in the night.*

May 30 Tuesday

[Goodell] *We crossed Wood river today. Paid half a dollar. The bridge was made of logs. There was a store there. Mr. Judson got some drilling for a tent 25 c a yard, a pair of shoes \$2.00, some tar \$6.00. Camped on the bank about one-half mile from the bridge. There was a very hard thunder storm last night. I sent a letter from here to Diantha and Elizabeth one to Phoebe.*

[Austin] *Today we crossed Wood River and camped a few rods this side. Meria and I sent each one of us a letter home. Meria wrote Diantha and I to Phoebe.*

May 31 Wednesday

[Goodell] *We crossed a good many bad places today. The roads are very muddy. There was another hard thunderstorm last night. We camped near the Platte River with plenty of wood and water, grass not very good.*

[Austin] *Today we crossed a great many bad places today. At night we camped near Platte River; plenty of wood and water.*

June 1 Thursday

[Goodell] *We passed one grave this morning. That makes seventeen we have passed since we left Missouri River. We went ninety-six miles before we saw any, then we saw two. We have crossed some pretty bad places. Crossed Elk Creek, I road across. We went very well, but the next wagon went partly off the bridge and lost out some things. It was a good camping place after we got over, plenty of wood and grass.*

[Austin] *Pass one grave this morning; saw one wolf. Just crossed Elm Creek, one yoke of cattle went off the bridge, and the wagon lost out several things. We were obliged to attach ropes to the wagons to guide them right. We have a good campground—plenty of wood and water. **The darkies had a dance.***

June 2 Friday

[Goodell] *It is very unpleasant this morning. We have passed a good many Buffalo bones and one grave. A Mr. John Chambers. The Ebey company passed it yesterday.*

[Austin] *We have passed a great many buffalo bones and one grave—A Mr. John Chambers—died 1853, age 53.*

June 3 Saturday

[Goodell] *It was very cold and cloudy this morning. Thundered and lightened about noon and again about three or four in the afternoon. The wind blew and it rained harder than I ever saw it before. It rained most all night. We camped on the Platte River.*

[Austin] *This morning I wish I was at home. We passed two buffaloes this forenoon. It thundered and lightened harder than I ever saw it before. It rained most all night. We camped on the Platte River.*

June 4 Sunday

[Goodell] *This morning we have passed one grave a new one. Mrs. Susannah Wilson aged 55, died May 21<sup>st</sup>, 1854. We are going to stop somewhere soon to dry our things. We have stopped out on the prairie and have emptied everything out of our wagon. Things are very damp.*

[Austin] *This morning we passed the grave of a lady—Mrs. Susanne Wilson, died May 21<sup>st</sup>, 1854, age 55.*

June 5 Monday

[Goodell] *We have traveled about twenty miles and some of the way was very bad going. Have camped by the side of a little pond of water but no wood. Have passed three graves.*

[Austin] *Today we had very bad roads; passed three graves; Wm and Lucretia got mad.*

June 6 Tuesday

[Goodell] *The wind blows some this morning. Last night the cattle were frightened by the wolves. Crossed a creek and camped about a mile west of it. The United States mail have camped here with us. I have written a letter to Jane Pelton.*

[Austin] *Today we have passed four graves; very sandy road. Wind blew hard. Buffalo chips is all the wood we have. Today I set up my stocking.*

June 7 Wednesday

[Goodell] *Very pleasant this morning. The baby is not very well. He has taken a very hard cold. **Mrs. Anderson has lost three head of cattle and her son has lost one.** They have most all gone after them.*

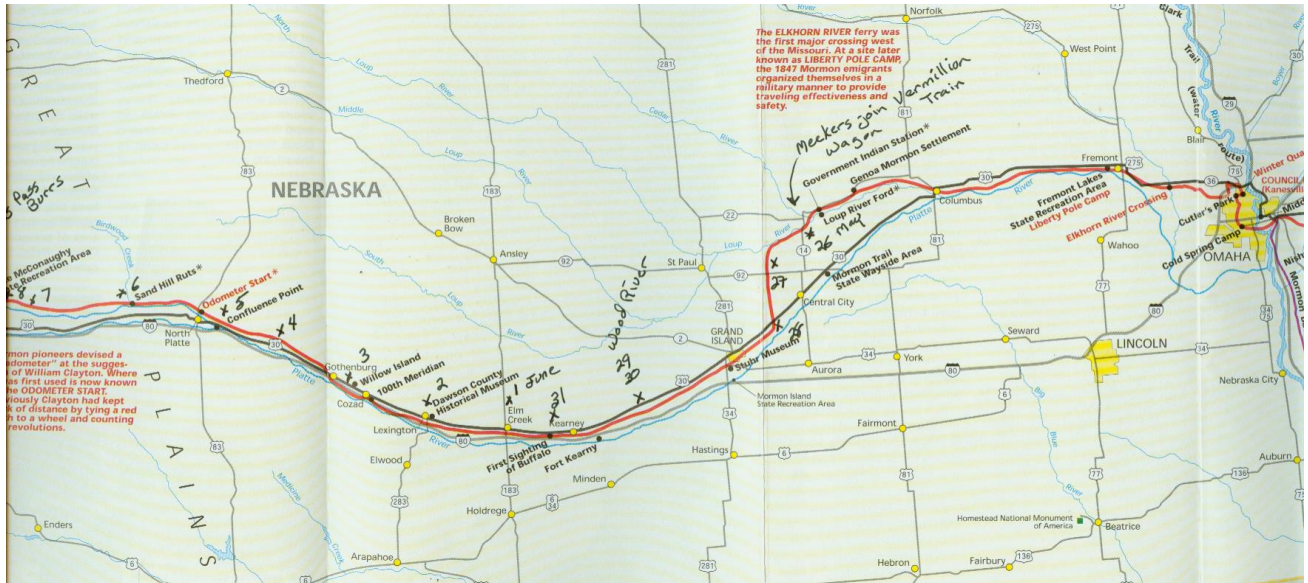
[Austin] *Was obliged to stop on account of **Mr. Anderson losing his cattle 4 head. Mr. Hammond went to look for them, and has not got back at night.** I found A.B. writing his likeness.*

June 7? [Spencer] *We traveled until we got within 100 miles of Fort Laramie—here we lost four oxen out of our company's cattle. All hands went out to find them. In this adventure we lost one man and horse, taken prisoner by the Indians, The next night they stampeded our horses and stock. Fortunately we were on the alert and saved them all.*

June 8 Thursday

[Goodell] **Mr. Hammond has not come yet.** We are almost afraid he has got lost among the bluffs. We shall not go far today. **Mr. Anderson and Mr. Wright have gone to look for him.** It is almost dark and they have not got back yet. We are afraid they have not found him.

[Austin] **Mr. H. has not got back yet. Mr. Anderson and Mr. Wright went after Mr. H—has not found him yet.**



### Meeker wagon train Nebraska campsites—May 26 to June 7, 1854

June 9 Friday

[Goodell] We have caught up with the Ebey company, they have laid over on account of one of their company being sick. He died today and was buried about an hour after. **We have just heard from Mr. Anderson and Mr. Wright. They have not found Mr. Hammond yet. They think the Indians have taken him. Mrs. Anderson found her cattle in Mr. Ebey's company; they had strayed away at night.**

[Austin] **Mr. H is not found yet.** Overtook Mr. Ebey and Company. One of his men died and we saw him buried. His name was James Wood. He died with no relation near him. Was buried in about one hour after he died, without a coffin. [In the mid-nineteenth century the cause of cholera was unknown. Many assumed you somehow caught it from bad air. The Stilly papers say that Solomon Burr caught the disease while burying Mr. Wood.]

[Ebey] At about 10 o'clock this morning James J. Wood deceased. We buried him on rising ground near Bluff Spring 100 yards from the road on the right hand side. I cut in a board his name, age, date where from & placed it at his head. Our old friend C.P. Judson

*& Co whom we left at Bluf City [Council Bluffs] passed us and are now ahead of us. We still hope to get together soon.*

June 10 Saturday

*[Goodell] We have traveled about twenty miles. It is very cold this morning. The baby is almost froze. **Mr. Anderson and Mr. Wright came back this evening. They did not find Mr. Hammond, but they found horse tracks and three pony tracks, two each side of them and one behind and it is thought he has been taken by Indians.***

*[Austin] **Mr. A. has not got back yet.** We camped near the river. **At night Mr. A. has got back but has not found Mr. H.***

*[Ebey] **A train are encamped near us who have lost a man. Supposed to be by Indians. He went out to hunt cattle & not returning, two men followed & found the track of his horse going off between two pony tracks. They pursued for some 15 miles, but could not come up with them. The company are now debating whether to return & continue the search, or not—I do not know what they will do—this occurred a day or two below here.***

June 11 Sunday

*[Goodell] And today is Sunday again. O what Sundays. There is nothing that seems like the Sabbath. I have been washing a little. O how glad I shall be if we can ever see anything but the plains. Today we have ascended a high sandy bluff, the roads are very sandy along here*

*[Austin] We have traveled all day today; camped near some traders—2 white men and 2 Indians near the river.*

June 12 Monday

*[Goodell] We crossed Castle River this morning. William killed a rattlesnake. It was the first one I ever saw. We have camped beside Platte River tonight. The mosquitoes are thick enough to eat a person up and not know where you have gone to. Have passed two graves today.*

*[Austin] Today we passed two graves*

June 13 Tuesday

*[Goodell] Crossed Crab Creek this morning. There was an Indian wigwam and a tent and a White man with a squaw for a wife. Elizabeth has a very hard pain in her right shoulder. We have passed two graves, one of them a new one, died the seventh of June. He was a brother of one of the women in our company she feels very bad about it. We have camped opposite the Bluffs ruins. One of the oxen's feet is lame tonight.*

*[Austin] We crossed Crab creek this morning; saw an Indian wigwam; passed two graves where there was a man and woman buried—a brother of Mrs. Tell. Passed two graves that were dug but no one was in them.*

June 14 Wednesday

[Goodell] *We left our camping place this morning I thought we would get to Chimney Rock by night, but we have not. We do not get along very fast. **Mrs. Meeker who has been sick is some better today, but not able to be up.** We passed two graves today, one new one, died on the 18<sup>th</sup> of May, the same day we crossed the Missouri River. The other one was 1850. We camped about one-half mile from an Indian Wigwam east of us and a mile from one west of us.*

[Austin] *Today we started from Ancient Bluff ruins—have been in sight of Castle Rock; camped near trading station kept by white men and Indians. It storms very hard tonight; have passed two graves; are in sight of another Indian wigwam. I was taken with the rheumatism yesterday, and is not much better today.*

June 15 Thursday

[Goodell] *We had a very hard storm last night and it is very warm this morning. I guess there will be another before night. Stopped at a wigwam this morning. William bought a pair of moccasins. We have stopped opposite Chimney Rock to feed. It looks very much like another storm. It has been storming and getting colder. Camped beside the Platte River.*

[Austin] *This morning we passed another trading station. Wm. bought him a pair of moccasins; stopped at noon opposite Chimney Rock; camped near the river; Chimney Rock is still in sight. My shoulder is still very lame; passed one grave today.*

June 16 Friday

[Goodell] *This morning there is a man here going to California on horse back. He crossed Missouri River the 4<sup>th</sup> of June. He has stopped at the camp this morning to get his breakfast.*

[Austin] *Passed two graves today; passed Hatt's Bluffs [Scott's Bluff]; camped near the river. My rheumatism is some better today.*

June 17 Saturday

[Goodell] ***Mrs. Meeker was taken sick this morning and we have stopped early tonight on her account. Mary is doing her washing and I am going to wash out a few things. Lib is not very well this morning. William bought her a pair of moccasins.***

[Austin] *I have laid abed all day today; my shoulder is worse. Wm bought me a pair of moccasins today.*

June 18 Sunday

[Goodell] ***This morning we left the Meeker company. Mrs. Meeker is no better. They do not think she will live. It does not seem right to leave this morning, but some of them think we ought to go so we started and went about 7 miles. Mr. Judsons oxen got frightened at some Indians and ran off side ways and came near upsetting the wagon. We***

*drove down to the river where there was a camp and staid there. It stormed quite hard. Elizabeth has been washing. We have not had a chance to wash all before since we left home. William has been writing to his father and I have been writing some in my letters. We will send them tomorrow from the fort.*

[Austin] ***We left Mr. Meeker's camp this morning. Mrs. M. is not expected to live.** We traveled 7 miles and stopped with a California Company. I did all our washing—the first good chance we have had to wash. We have plenty good wood and water.*

June 19 Monday

[Goodell] *This morning we have got ready for another start. We are fifteen miles from the fort. [Laramie] We got to the fort a little after noon and camped about two miles west of it. **We heard from the company that we left and Mrs. Meeker died last night.** William and Charley have gone on ahead to see if they can see anything of the Ebey company. They have just got back and the Ebey's are about a mile from here.*

[Austin] *We have just got to the fort [Laramie] about noon. Wm. went over and took our letters. We have traveled a few miles and camped with a California company. Wm. and Charles went over the hills to find Ebey's Company. They found them about three-quarters of a mile off. We expect to overtake them in the morning. **Mrs. M. died this morning.***

Ebey also gives us a detailed look at the death of David Solomon Burr.

*Tuesday June 20<sup>th</sup> 1854*

*Laid in camp all day in consequence of the sickness & death of one of the Company—Mr. S.P. Burr this morning at daylight was taken violently ill with the Cholera & at 3 oclk this afternoon he was a corpse. Yesterday he was as well as usual & went to his bed with as high hopes as he had felt on the road Now he lies in the grave & his stricken wife & Six small children mourn the loss of a Husband & Father—Mr B suffered the extremist anguish throughout the day until relieved by the Kindly hand of Death Every thing that could be done, was tried with no effect I started to go to the fort for some medicine but was not able to ride Mr Bradly went over but the medicine did no good Poor fellow he was called to his accord very Suddenly We buried him this evening—Mrs Burr & children will go on with her brother-in-law Headley.*

The Stilley papers have a different view of the event.

*While approaching Fort Laramie David Burr died of cholera, contracted while helping to bury a comrade who had just died of the same disease. David's wife, Nancy (North) Burr and her 3 children (and pregnant with a 4th) stopped to bury David. The Burr family now consisted of the mother, Nancy, daughter, Mariah Angelina, sons, Samuel & Lynus and Nancy was pregnant with David Burr's daughter, Sarah. While the Jacob Redding Meeker family was approaching Fort Laramie in Wyoming, Jacob's wife, Phoebe Shaw (Baker) Meeker (Jacob's wife and Ezra's Mother) died of cholera. Jacob stopped to bury her and met Nancy (North) Burr and her children. The Burr family joined the same party as the*

*Meeker family and proceeded west. When they arrived in what is now eastern Washington, Jacob sent word to Ezra that they needed assistance in going through the Cascade Mountains to Steilacoom, Washington Territory, the main port on Puget Sound. Ezra borrowed a pony and traveled through Naches Pass, located Jacob and party and guided them back through the pass to Orting and thence to Steilacoom. This was only the second, and was the last, Oregon Trail party to travel this route. Nancy gave birth to Sarah in Steilacoom. About a year after arriving, Jacob Meeker and Nancy (North) Burr married in Steilacoom.*

Mariah Burr Stilley celebrated her sixtieth wedding anniversary in Okanogan, Washington. As part of the celebration she had a brief biography printed. In it she stated, *Both the Meeker and Burr families came from Ohio. Leaving her native state in the spring of 1854, in company with a great number of other families, Mrs. Stilley set out for the west with her parents. Jake Meeker was a member of another immigrant train, en route west to join his son, Ezra, who had traversed the trail two years before. The two trains were about a day apart. Cholera, contracted by Mrs. Stilley's father while preparing for burial the body of one of their comrades, caused the death of Mr. Burr. On the same day, the wagons following stopped to prepare a grave for Mrs. Jake Meeker, who died from the same disease.*

While the Stilley papers have some of the facts correct, there are some obvious errors. A thorough reading of the Ebey diary makes it very clear that Jacob Meeker did not travel west with Mrs. Burr after the death of their spouses. The Meekers fell behind the now combined Ebey/Vermilion train after Phoebe's death and never caught up. Indeed, a close reading of all the diaries found only one instance when the Meeker and Burr parties even camped together and that was the night of June 10<sup>th</sup> after the death of James Wood. That night there was much discussion about Indians kidnapping Mr. Hammond of the Meeker company and Ebey obviously strolled over as he relates most of the details of the discussion in his diary. Unfortunately for the romantic minded, the spouses of Jacob and Nancy were still very much alive that night. It is clear however that the Ebey/Vermilion wagon train knew of Phoebe Meeker's death. It is not clear if the Meeker wagon train knew of David Solomon Burr's death. Perhaps they visited the grave when they drove past it a few days later. Ebey doesn't say if he put up a marker as he did for James Wood, but it's possible that if he didn't, Headley or Whitesell did. Other errors are the number of children that Nancy had and the fact that she was pregnant and gave birth to Sarah Burr shortly after arriving in Steilacoom. These items are at odds with the established facts. Finally there is the assertion that David Solomon Burr contracted cholera while preparing James Wood's body for burial. Wood was buried ten days before David Solomon became ill. Cholera is caused by a bacteria spread by consuming water contaminated with human fecal material. The incubation time is much less than ten days. As mentioned earlier, the emigrants of the time had no understanding as to how the disease was spread. Handling the body of a cholera victim seemed at the time a reasonable explanation as to how David Solomon Burr contracted the disease.

June 21 Wednesday

[Austin] *This morning Mr. Ebey & Company and we started together from the place where they buried Mr. Burr. We traveled about 20 miles over the Black Hills; camped where there is no water; passed 4 graves*

[Ebey] *Judson & Co in train making fifteen wagons in all & an addition of 4 men three married ladies & two single ones Miss Lucretia J & Miss E. A. Austin—all bound for W. T.*

June 27 Tuesday

[Goodell] ***The Meekers are fourteen miles behind us. Some of the company have lost a child.***

July 1 Saturday nearing Independence Rock

[Goodell] ***Mr. Anderson and Wright passed us yesterday. They have left the Meeker Company.***

At Independence Rock on July 3rd the Ebey train split into two smaller trains. Those going to California split off and went their separate way. Ebey describes those who went with him to Washington Territory.

*Our teams moved on followed by Messrs Judson, Van Wormer, Goodell, Headley, Whitesell Mrs Burr & last of all Came King. this we did not expect all hands thought K—bound for Cal. Our train now numbers 9 waggon, all for W.T.*

July 4 Tuesday

[Austin] *We left the rock this morning and camped 9 miles west. Mr. Anderson and Miller camped near by. Lucretia and I went to the camps at night.*

July 5 Wednesday

[Austin] *We started this morning after Anderson and Miller and traveled in sight of them, but lost sight of them before night. Mr. Cannon joined our company today.*

July 6 Thursday

[Prickett] *“At noon, July 5, we reached Independence Rock ... That evening we reached the Sweetwater River, and Carlson had selected our camp up that stream, a considerable distance from the trail, and under the very shadow of the mountains at the lower end of the Devil’s Gate. It was not more than a mile through the gorge, and I had a great desire to pass through it and see its wonders. Ike expressed a similar wish and Carlson, knowing that we were more closely confined to the road on account of our duties as drivers of the teams, readily granted our request and detailed two of the men to take charge of our teams. We expected to make the passage of the gorge in time to meet the teams at its western end, and could easily have done so, but something occurred to prevent. We had passed about halfway through this gloomy gorge, the bottom of which was seldom if ever lighted by the sun’s bright rays, when we heard the voice of a man near the upper end of the chasm, calling the name of someone. But although his voice echoed and re-echoed from side to side of these walls of almost perpendicular rock, no answering shout was heard in response. We instinctively knew that something was wrong,*

because we could detect a note of great anxiety and a tinge of anguish in the voice of the unknown as he pronounced the name he was calling. He soon appeared, but on the opposite side of the river from us. When directly opposite us, he inquired who we were and if we had come up through the entire length of the chasm. We told him why we were there and that we were making our way through the gorge its entire length. He anxiously inquired if we had seen anyone while coming up the river. We said we had not. **He then explained that his name was [Oliver] Meeker. That his father, mother, brother, and sister were emigrating from Ohio to Oregon, and had camped the previous night at the upper end of The Devil's Gate. That his youngest brother, a young man of 18 years, had been on guard the latter part of the night, and that at daylight had gone down into this gloomy chasm no doubt to get a view of its scenery. That they had heard a shot in the chasm after he had entered it, but that he had not returned to camp.** He inquired if we had fired the shot. We told him we had not. He went on down the stream calling the name of the absent one while we followed up the stream in the direction he had come.

We had not proceeded far when, in a little eddying basin formed by some rocks jutting into the water, we found the body of the young man washed up against the shore. We pulled the body from the water and while Ike proceeded immediately to manipulate it so as to bring back animation if possible, I clambered to the top of a rock from which point I could see the brother far down the river, but its never-ceasing roar which filled the gorge perpetually, prevented him from hearing my calls. **I took out my revolver and discharged it three times in quick succession, and the reports reverberating from side to side of the rocky walls finally reached him, as they did the anxious ones waiting in the camp at the head of the chasm. He looked around, and taking off my hat, I signaled to him, and he hurriedly returned.**

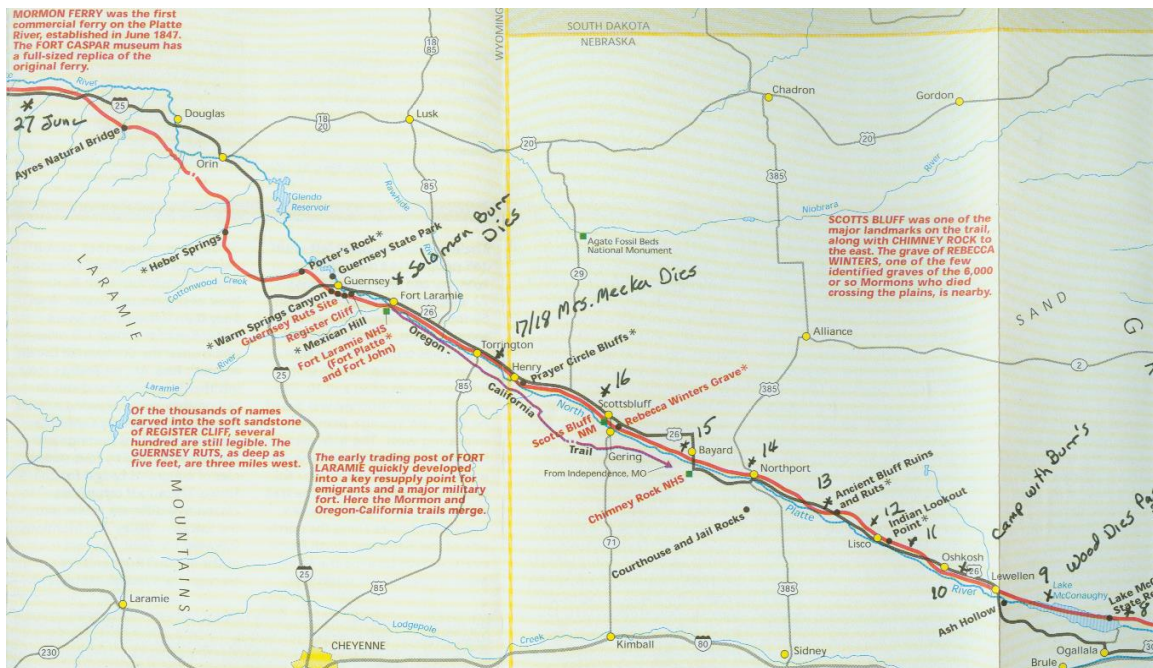
Those in camp who had heard the reports of my revolver, also came down the river to where we were, and their grief was heart-rending in its intensity. Probably never before nor since has The Devil's Gate echoed such wails of anguish and grief as were mingled with the ceaseless wailing of its waters on this occasion. I intuitively knew that our efforts to restore animation would prove fruitless, but we remained with them until they, too, gave up hope. The brother whom we had first met seemed most deeply stricken. He explained to us that he had been to Oregon where he had prepared a home for his parents, brother and sister, and had returned to accompany them overland to the new home. He said he had induced them to emigrate, and now blamed himself for being the indirect cause of his brother's death. **Ike and I, being the only one's present not members of the grief stricken family, carried the body out of the canyon and to their camp.** It was found that one chamber of the young man's revolver was empty. It was conjectured that he had fired it simply to hear the report echo and re-echo down the chasm. That he had then attempted to cross the Sweetwater by stepping or jumping from rock to rock, and the surface of some of them being glassy in their smoothness, he had fallen and stricken his head against the rock, had become unconscious and was drowned. A bruise on the side of his head near the temple seemed to confirm the correctness of this conjecture. **His name was Clark Meeker. We found that they were making the journey with horses and wagons, but no cattle.** Learning that our train had passed an hour or two before, we were compelled to start out on foot to overtake them, leaving this grief-stricken family alone with their dead.

July 6 Thursday

[Spencer] *Nothing of note happened until we reached Devil's Gate. It is a cannon running through the Rocky Mountains, through which a small river flows – the rocks are perpendicular for 400 feet high. **Here is where we lost Clark Meeker. He fell from the rock into the river and was either killed or drowned. In the morning we found him, and in the afternoon we buried him.** This was reducing our number fast.*

July 14 Friday

[Spencer] *We reached the South Pass of the Rocky Mountains, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July. Here you could eat snow any time you choose, in altitude of 7550 feet. This is the dividing ridge of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. As we were leaving the western declivity of the Rocky Mountains, I felt as though I was placing a huge barrier between me and my dear family. On July 11 Ebey was at South Pass. At this point the Meeker train was three days behind the Ebey train.*



### Meeker wagon train campsites—June 8 to June 27, 1854

At Bear River, near today's Soda Springs, Idaho, Prickett encountered the Meeker train once again.

*When we reached the Great Bend of Bear River it lacked an hour or two of our regular camping time, but as our trail led off westwardly through a very desolate region in which there was no water for many miles, we went into camp.*

*At this bend, Bear River, after running almost directly north for many miles, turns almost directly south around the point of a high mountain, and flows south to Salt Lake into which it empties its waters.*

*After we had been in camp for a couple of hours, about the sunset hour **a train composed of several horse teams** came in sight, and went into camp a short distance from us. In the evening I, and some others from our company, went over to their camp, and I was surprised to find **it was the Meeker families**, whom we had last seen at The Devil's Gate, on the Sweetwater, one hundred miles or more east of the South Pass in the Rocky Mountains. It was a member of one of these families-Clark Meeker-whom Ike and I had found drowned in the Devil's Gate. They seemed pleased to meet us again, and took occasion to thank us again for the assistance we had rendered them on that sad occasion. They were bound for Oregon, and here at this bend in the Bear River, the Oregon road branched off from the California trail, going northwesterly through what seemed a desert-like region in the direction of Fort Hall, on Snake River, and about seventy miles distant.*

*On the following morning both companies broke camp and started at the same time-we to the southwest and they to the northwest; the ladies of their company waving us a last adieu with their handkerchiefs until a sand ridge hid their wagons from our view.*

*Referring to this train of horse teams, reminds me that since my return to the states, many people, when informed that I made this long journey with ox-teams, have expressed surprise that we undertook the trip with such slow teams as oxen, saying that they would have taken horses, and made the journey in much less time. They do not understand the conditions existing at that time, conditions and environments which made oxen the fastest animals on the road."*

The Ebey/Vermillion trains and the Meeker train took different routes across Idaho. Ebey took what is known as the Jeffreys' route going north of today's Craters of the Moon National Monument and rejoining the main trail just east of present day Boise, then following the Boise River to its confluence with the Snake River at Fort Boise. The Meekers took the route followed by Oliver in 1852, going along the south bank of the Snake River to Three Island Crossing, then working their way northwest to the Boise River and following it west to Fort Boise. Thomas Spencer supplies us with the only information we have about this leg of the journey.

Late July, early August

*[Spencer] We went along smoothly until we got to Snake River. Here our cattle died very fast, and in larger numbers than before. I have seen cattle take sick, and in two hours drop down dead. In fact, I have traveled for days together, in the smell of putrefying carcasses that lay in the road.*

The Indians of Idaho were about to give all the wagon trains in the area a frightful experience.

August 17 Thursday

Goodell wrote that Johnny Grant who was leading a group of packers on their way to Oregon City caught up with them. She also noted that Indians visited their camp. Both would play a role in what was about to happen.

August 18 Friday

Yantis train camped on the Boise River. Ebey train camped at Willow Creek in Danskin Mountains. Ebey has an arrow fly past him while on guard duty.

August 19 Saturday

Yantis train camped on the Boise River, Indians stole a cow. Ebey train camped at Soles Rest Creek

[Austin] *Captain Grant's Company has caught up with us.*

The Kirkland train was attacked near Little Camas Creek

**August 19, 1854** A large emigrant train heading to Oregon had split up into three sections, and the last four wagons had fallen several miles behind. About 70 miles southeast of the old Hudson's Bay company post of Fort Boise, a number of Indians approached the group of 4 families and 2 unattached young men. Ostensibly, the Indians sought to trade for whiskey. The emigrants said they had none. The Indians shook hands, appearing friendly, then opened fire, killing George Lake and fatally wounding two others in the party, Empson Cantrell and Walter G. Perry. The emigrants returned fire and wounded two Indians. The Indians stole five horses and rode off.<sup>11</sup>

August 20?

[Spencer] *We came to Boise River. Here we picked up a paper stating that three men had been killed the day before – men I was acquainted with on the road. The Indians attacked their train of 10 men in day time – killed 3 men, and succeeded in taking all their horses. The whites killed two Indians.*

Apparently the Meeker wagon train was close enough that Grant sent them a paper also telling them of the attack on the Kirkland train, or the paper could have been left on a stick along the trail to be picked up by the next passing train. At this point the Meeker train was likely a couple of days ahead of the Kirkland train and just behind the Ebey train.

August 20 Sunday Boise River

[Goodell] *Whitesell caught some fish.*

**August 20, 1854 Ward Massacre (Middleton, Idaho)** The day after the Kirkland attack the vanguard of the same large but dispersed wagon train to Oregon was about 25 miles southeast of Fort Boise on the Boise River, near present-day Middleton, Idaho, when a large party of Indians approached Alexander Ward's five-wagon train of twenty

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<sup>11</sup> According to Idaho OCTA member Jerry Eichhorst, the diarists called them Snake Indians. They were probably Bannocks or Paiutes, or as the Ward attackers were called Winnestas, a small subgroup of Indians that lived along the Boise River.

emigrants. The Indians killed Ward and seventeen others and raped and tortured the women. Children were also tortured. One boy, 13-year-old Newton Ward, was shot and left for dead. His 15-year-old brother, William, was shot through the left lung and had an arrow through his right side but lived. He hid in the brush until the Indians left, then wandered for four days until he reached Fort Boise.

While the massacre was taking place, a group of seven emigrants under Alex Yantis, backtracking in search of a stray cow, saw the commotion. They rushed in and rescued Newton Ward, but the Indians killed one of them, a young man named Amon, in the process. Outnumbered, the Yantis's party retreated to Fort Boise. When the Indians left, they took 46 cows and horses and more than \$2,000 in money and property. A rescue party of 18 men from Fort Boise arrived two days later, only to bury the mutilated victims.

August 20

The Ebey train reached the Boise River. The Meeker train was just behind and coming along the Boise River from the east.

August 21 Monday

Yantis train reached Fort Boise

Ebey train remained camped at Boise River

August 22 Tuesday

[Goodell] *As we were leaving camp this morning we saw four wagons on the hill. We stopped and waited for a while for them to catch up with us as they seemed to be driving very fast. One man came on ahead and said that their train had been attacked by Indians the Saturday before and two men were shot from their horses and another very badly wounded. They shot two Indians and lost five horses. We traveled about twelve miles and camped on Boise River. The wounded man died about 12 o'clock. I am 23 years old today.* This was the Kirkland train. The wounded man was Walter Perry

August 23 Wednesday

[Goodell] *Last night an Indian came out to our camp and said he had a paper for Mr. Ebey. He read it. It was from Capt. Grant and said that there had been four wagons attacked by Indians and all the people killed about four or six miles ahead. They had partly finished burying the bodies and wanted us to finish burying them when we came along.*

Ebey train camped southeast of Middleton

August 24 Thursday

Ebey train passed the Ward Massacre site, buried more of dead, and camped near present day Parma. Winfield wrote, "A very bad smell pervaded this place. After burying the dead I put up a notice to those behind to be on their guard . . ." Did he know the Meeker train was behind them? The Meeker train passed the site a day or two after the Ebey train.

August 26?

*(Spencer) Further down Boise River, within 25 miles of Fort Boise, was committed one of the greatest Indian massacres that ever was committed since the days of Adam. We were within 50 miles of the scene of action, when it took place. When we came up to it, the smell was insufferable – 19 persons lay buried in one pile; scarcely covered with dirt. Even the wolves, which are very numerous, had dragged the bodies up, filled themselves and then took them to their holes. Here you could see an arm, there a leg with a boot on. It was an awful sight, such as I never want to witness again.*

This event was seared into the minds of those who passed by. Word of the massacre spread like wildfire up and down the Trail and to the settlements in Oregon and on Puget Sound. A military response quickly happened.

*Maj. Granville O. Haller, with a group of 43 Army cavalry members from The Dalles, 37 Oregon volunteers led by Capt. Nathan Olney, Indian Agent R. R. Thompson, and about a dozen Cayuse and Nez Perce Indians, arrived at Fort Boise in early September. Their mission was to protect the remaining emigrants and to find the Indians responsible for the attack on the Ward party. By the time they arrived, all emigrant trains had passed the area. Haller held a council with the local Bannock Indians to establish expectations in dealing with the Winnestass, perpetrators of the Ward attack. Haller then moved to the Payette River, where he found an abandoned Indian camp with many items from the Ward wagon train. Haller found another abandoned Indian camp on the Boise River near the attack site. A number of Indians were taken prisoner; a few not involved with the Ward attack were killed. After accomplishing little more than reburying the attack victims, the campaign returned to The Dalles in early October. Meanwhile, reports were received that the attackers had travelled to the Salmon River near the Nez Perce area in northern Idaho.<sup>12</sup>*

September 6 Wednesday At Emigrant Springs in the Blue Mountains Ebey wrote, *Here we met Major [G.O.] Haller with a company of U.S. troops (mounted) going out to chastise the Indians for the murder of the emigrants. ... During the afternoon, we met a Company of Mounted Volunteers under Capt Nathan Olney, from Oregon going out to fight the Indians. One of our men turned back with them (A. Underwood) they furnishing him a horse & outfit*

September 8?

*(Spencer) On our way home, we met Major Haller with the soldiers, and Captain Olney with a company of volunteers on their way to fight the Snake Indians, the ones who had committed the outrages.*

A year later the Puget Sound Indian wars began. When word of the massacre of the King family, who had traveled with the Ebey train (making a fateful decision while at Independence Rock to head for Washington Territory instead of California) reached the Meekers in their cabins in Fern Hill five miles east of Fort Steilacoom on October 29,

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<sup>12</sup> R. R. Thompson, Letter, *Weekly Oregon Statesman*, Salem, Marian, Oregon, October 24, 1854, pg2.

1855, a debate ensued as to what course of action to take. Ezra said, *"My brother, O.P. Meeker, and myself stoutly contended we had best barricade the cabins and stay where we were, but father and the women of the household said "no" with such emphasis that the conclusion was soon reached that we must fly."* Nearly every settler in Pierce County evacuated to the fort. The Whitesells, the Headleys, the Burrs, and the Meekers would all be living in and around Fort Steilacoom for the next several years, some even longer. Everyone but Ezra had seen what an Indian massacre looked like and they wanted no part of another.

## **Naches Pass**

Ebey's diary on September 3<sup>rd</sup> said, *"This forenoon we met on the road, Mr. Jas. K Hurd of Olympia W.T. He has been on the road all summer giving the emigrants information about the new road from Walla Walla to the Sound—Hearing of our train he came out to meet us . . . He left this evening for the sound."*

September 3 Sunday

*[Austin] We traveled about 6 miles [from their camp on the Powder River] when a man met us who was going through to Washington. We got to the Round about 4 o'clock in the afternoon.*

James K. Hurd of Olympia was the financial manager of the emigrant road fund that the settlers of Puget Sound had established in order to build and improve a wagon road over Naches Pass. Edward Jay Allen, an immigrant of 1852, had for two summers led work parties into the Cascades to build the rough wagon road that would give the emigrants direct access to Puget Sound from the Columbia River. In 1854 Hurd made two trips east over the trail to ascertain conditions of the emigrant trains and spread word to them of the new wagon road into Washington Territory. On one of the trips he somehow heard through the Oregon Trail grapevine that the Meeker train had fallen behind and was running short of provisions. On his return to Olympia he passed this information on to Ezra Meeker who was then living on McNeil Island. I argue later that this is likely the trip Hurd learned about the Meeker family being belated and that he notified Ezra Meeker of this about September 12 or 13 and that Ezra left for Naches Pass on September 14.

September 4 Monday

*[Ebey] As we now consider ourselves out of danger from the Indians we divided our train into 3 companies this morning*

On September 5 Tuesday Ebey wrote of their departure from the Grand Ronde Valley. *[Ebey] Grande Ronde River. 12 mi. "Last night & this morning were rainy. The road muddy & the ascent of the mountain steep & very slippery. The prospect of getting up the hill rather dubious. We were advised not to try the road as our cattle could probably not hold their feet, however we determined to try. Messrs. Kirkland's & Yantes' train started ahead of us. We got to the foot of the hill, doubled teams, putting 6 & 7 yoke of oxen to a wagon & pulled up the first steep ascent, then with single teams proceeded, passing all before us. At the second steep place we doubled again and finally reached the summit 3*

*miles from the foot of the hill, just as a heavy storm of rain & hail came on so that we were wet to the skin and covered with mud. The road is very slippery, but not very steep. Towards noon the weather became better and we had good roads for 5 miles, when we took a new road to the left, to get a better camp, & descended & crossed a deep canyon, when we had to double teams again. The road is then good for 4 miles to this camp, which is I think, as beautiful, romantic a spot as could well be imagined. The beautiful pine timber, the soft carpet of green grass & flowers, the beautiful clear mountain stream [Grande Ronde River] all combine to make this a charming place to rest. The country, since we ascended the mountain, has been of the most delightful character. It has been so long since we have been in timber, it seems a luxury to be beneath the tall pines. The mountain is everywhere covered with a rich coating of short green grass with now & then small prairies or "pine openings." It is certainly the finest grazing country I ever saw besides being rich in agricultural resources. Messrs. K's & Y's trains have got in & camped near us."*

[Lulu Packard's Obituary written by George Himes, secretary of the Oregon Historical Society]

*[A]rriving at Umatilla Indian-reservation, near Pendleton of the present day, about August 26. While in camp there it was decided by those Mr. and Mrs. Packard were with, Jessie Dunlap, Oliver Meeker, Alexander Yantis and others that they would go direct to Puget Sound, following the trail made in 1853 by the first immigration over that difficult route.*

This date is way too early as witnessed by Ebey's and Austin's diary stating it was September 7 when they reached this point.

September 7 Thursday

*[Austin] Today we traveled 15 miles which brought us to the Umatilla Valley.*

*[Ebey] We descended the hill ... and found ourselves on level country at the western base of the Blue Mountains. We are now at the junction of the Oregon and Washington roads . . . we turn to the right to Puget Sound via Walla Walla.*

September 11 Monday

*[Ebey] We met Mr. Shirley Ensign who has established a ferry at this place . . . Mr. Yantis has his wagons across and we shall cross in the morning . . . Provisions of all kinds are to be had at this place.*

Ezra Meeker would not reach the Columbia River ferry until the evening of September 23.

After hearing from Hurd, Meeker made preparations to meet his family and help guide them to safety over the new Naches Pass road. Meeker said, *"It was on the third day of September of 1854 that I left home. I had been planting turnips for two days and made a memorandum of the date, and by that fix the date of my departure."* James Hurd was in the Grand Ronde valley on this date.

A wonderful, detailed, description of Ezra's trip over the mountains may be found in his book *Pioneer Reminiscences*, but a close examination of that account leads to the conclusion that Meeker was in error in marking his start date as September 3.

Ezra describes how at twilight, hearing the tinkling of a bell, seeing campfires and wagons, he spurred his horse ahead thinking that this camp might be his family. Instead he had encountered the combined Ebey/Vermillion/Yantis wagon trains. Meeker tells of meeting the Harvey Jones and George King families, advising them where to find good land for claims, and of being fed a hearty dinner. Mrs. Jones asked him if he was going out on the plains alone and he responded yes. Mrs. Jones remembering the scenes around the Ward Massacre site that she had passed just days earlier said, "*Well, I don't think it's safe.*" When did this meeting happen? The diaries tell us.

September 19 Tuesday

[Austin] *Met Mr. Meeker on his way to meet his father.*

September 20 Wednesday

[Ebey] *This morning we met Mr. Ezra Meeker of the Sound going out to meet his father's family Who are behind us. They are from Eddyville Iowa. Poor fellow he had not heard of the death of his Mother before. She died on the Platte. Much of his anticipated pleasure is dashed to earth by this announcement. We thought it better to let him hear the worst before he met his father. He pushed on with a Sad heart to meet the family.*

The Ebey and Austin diaries fix the date of this encounter as the evening of September 19. If Ezra left home on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, it took him sixteen days on horseback to travel this far. It took the wagon trains sixteen days to travel from the site of their meeting with Ezra to Steilacoom. A close reading of Meeker's description of his trip shows him arriving in the Ebey camp on the evening of his fifth day of travel. Needless to say there is quite a discrepancy between five days and sixteen days. Meeker, I believe, despite his turnip planting memorandum was wrong as to when he departed. Remember, he is writing this some fifty years after the event. **It is much more likely that he started on September 14, rather than September 3.** This date also gives James Hurd time enough to return from Grande Ronde with the news that the Meeker train was belated.

A brief description of Meeker's trip over Naches Pass is in order. He left Steilacoom and began walking east with a sack of provisions over his shoulder. That evening he reached Jonathan McCarty's place near the present day city of Sumner. Here he borrowed a horse and began working his way into the mountains. The next night was spent at Alan Porter's cabin on the White River. On the morning of his third day he encountered a group of three women and eight children walking toward the settlements. [Mrs. Hall, Mrs. Herspburger and Mrs. Fawcett.] He shared what little food he had with them and learned that their wagon train had abandoned all but one of their wagons a few miles back as their stock was worn out. That night he camped alone in Government Meadows. In the morning he discovered that his horse had wandered off and several hours were spent chasing him down. Ezra nooned at the summit, traveled on into the night, camping on a sand bar along the Naches River. It snowed lightly that night. His fifth day out involved

thirty-two crossings of the Naches River. Just at dark Meeker came upon the Ebey wagon train. The next morning, according to his diary, Ebey gave Ezra the very bad news about his mother's death. Ebey must have known something of the whereabouts of the Meeker train at this point as he clearly wrote they "are behind us." This again suggests that despite being spread out over several days travel communication between trains happened.

Two more days of hard riding brought Ezra to the Columbia River. A temporary ferry had been established for the Naches emigrants on the Columbia River at the site of old Fort Walla Walla. Shirley Ensign of Olympia was manning it, waiting for the last of the wagon trains to arrive. Ezra reached the crossing at dark, found the ferry on the other side, no sign of Ensign and no way to get across. So he wrapped himself up in his blanket, curled up in a sand storm and tried to sleep. At dawn Ezra began shouting and hollering but received no response. The ferrymen were still asleep. Finally Ezra saw smoke coming out of the chimney and then a man ventured out of the door of the cabin. This time Ezra was heard. Ensign told Ezra that he had recently been out on the trail fifty miles and had met his people. He thought they were camped some thirty miles away, and expected they would reach the ferry the following day. Ezra procured a fresh horse at the ferry crossing and rode east all day on September 23.

*Sundown came and no signs of the camp; dusk came on, and still no signs; finally, I spied some cattle grazing on the upland, and soon came upon the camp in a ravine that had shut them out from view. Rejoicings and outbursts of grief followed. I inquired for my mother first thing. She was not there; had been buried in the sands of the Platte Valley, months before; also a younger brother lay buried near Independence Rock. The scene that followed is of too sacred memory to write about, and we will draw the veil of privacy over it. According to Ebey, Ezra knew his mother had died. The death of Clark Meeker he did not know about.*

*With fifty head of stock, seven wagons, and seventeen people, the trip to the Sound was made without serious mishap or loss. We were twenty two days on the road...I unhesitatingly advised the over-mountain trip; meanwhile cautioning them to expect some snow, a goodly amount of hard labor, and plenty of vexation. How long will it take? Three weeks. Why, we thought we were about through. Well you came to stay with us, did you? But what about the little wife and the two babies on the island home? Father said someone must go and look after them. So, the elder brother [Oliver] was detailed to go to the Island folks, whilst I was impressed into service to take his place with the immigrants.*

On September 25 the Ebey party encountered Edward Jay Allen's thirty-man road construction crew just east of the summit and spent the night with them. Ebey sold Allen his well-used tent. The original purchase price was three dollars. The sale price was ten dollars. Ebey chuckled in his diary over the sale. "...this evening disposed of our faithful old tent to Mr. Allen...we had used it pretty well up..." The next day the Ebey Train reached Naches Pass. On September 30 they broke out of the forest and camped in a grassy valley just northeast of the present city of Buckley. Their journey was nearly over.

On October 4 the Ebey train reached the Puyallup River.

[Austin] *We forded Puyallup this morning once. We traveled 10 miles and camped where Mr. Judson & Ebey did on the top of a hill. **Mr. [Oliver] Meeker overtook us at the foot of the hill. Was going after a team to take hay to the cattle in the mountains.*** It took Oliver just eleven days to travel from thirty miles east of the Columbia River to Steilacoom. And this assumes that he started the morning after his brother Ezra met Jacob Meeker's wagon train. This casts even more doubt on Ezra's September 3<sup>rd</sup> starting date. Oliver traveled much farther and did it quicker than the sixteen days it would have taken Ezra to travel a much shorter distance if we accept his September 3<sup>rd</sup> starting date.

[Spencer] *In ascending the eastern slope of the Cascade Mountains, we had to cross a stream 63 times within a distance of 30 miles, which took us 5 days of hard labor.<sup>13</sup> At length we reached the summit. Here another hard drive was waiting for us – 50 miles without any grass for our stock. After this we reached the settlement, 50 miles more from Steilacoom, and in a few more days reached Meeker's Island.*

*I must confess I was somewhat disappointed in the looks of the country around me. This Island is about 3 miles from town, in Puget Sound. It is a wilderness of timber, and the land is the poorest quality imaginable. – Think of men coming 2000 miles, leaving the fertile Valley of the Desmoines, to chop down trees 10 feet through to make a farm, just because they don't have to feed stock more than a month in the year. I would rather live a poor man all my life than follow such a business.*

Two items need clarification. The first is the question of horse vs. oxen or cattle as the immigrants referred to them. Prickett, writing his memoir nearly fifty years after the event, stated twice that the Meekers were traveling with horse teams pulling the wagons. The first was as Devil's gate when he found Clark Meekers body. *We found that they were making the journey **with horses and wagons, but no cattle.*** Then at Bear River in far eastern Idaho Prickett again encountered the Meekers. *After we had been in camp for a couple of hours, about the sunset hour **a train composed of several horse teams** came in sight, and went into camp a short distance from us. In the evening I, and some others from our company, went over to their camp, and I was surprised to find **it was the Meeker families,** whom we had last seen at The Devil's Gate. Referring to this train of horse teams, reminds me that since my return to the states, many people, when informed that I made this long journey with ox-teams, have expressed surprise that we undertook the trip with such slow teams as oxen, saying that they would have taken horses, and made the journey in much less time. They do not understand the conditions existing at that time, conditions and environments which made oxen the fastest animals on the road.*

But we have several accounts from people who were writing them in 1854. The first was Thomas Spencer who was a member of the Meeker wagon train. [Spencer] *We traveled until we got within 100 miles of Fort Laramie—**here we lost four oxen out of our company's cattle.** All hands went out to find them. In this adventure we lost one man and horse, taken prisoner by the Indians, The next night **they stampeded our horses and stock.** Fortunately we were on the alert and saved them all.*

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<sup>13</sup> Ebey also took five days to traverse this section of the trail crossing the Naches River 59 times.

*We went along smoothly until we got to Snake River. **Here our cattle died very fast, and in larger numbers than before. I have seen cattle take sick, and in two hours drop down dead. In fact, I have traveled for days together, in the smell of putrefying carcasses that lay in the road.***

The second is Anna Maria Goodell on May 27, “*There is a darky ... he got **his cattle** in a mud hole.*” June 6, “*Last night **the cattle were frightened** by the wolves.*”

The third was from Elizabeth Austin on June 1, “*Just crossed Elm Creek. **One yoke of cattle fell off the bridge.***”

October 4, “*Mr. [Oliver] Meeker overtook us at the foot of the hill. Was going after a team **to take hay to the cattle in the mountains . . .***”

Then we have Ezra Meeker writing fifty years or more after the event. *We came back through Naches Pass **with three ox teams.** We were nearly a month making 40 miles in the mountains. With fifty head of stock, seven wagons, and seventeen people, the trip to the Sound was made without serious mishap or loss.*

So we have contradictory statements—memoirs vs. contemporary. Usually in cases like this contemporary is given the greater weight. But Spencer and Meeker opened the door to both being correct. Fifty head of stock for seven wagons equals seven animals per wagon. There could easily have been a mixture of oxen and horses.

The second issue is the fact that the Meeker wagons arrived on the shores of Puget Sound two weeks after the combined Ebey/Vermillion wagon trains. The Meeker train was no more than three or four days behind Ebey at Fort Boise. But they lost at least ten days or more when going over the Blue Mountains and the Naches Trail. What happened? Again, we must say we don’t know. They could have taken an extended rest at the Grand Ronde valley, as many immigrants did. Or they may have found this section of the trail more difficult than the Ebey trains did and simply slowed down. Ezra wrote that it took between twenty-two days to a month (it depended upon which telling of the crossing he told) to traverse the section from Wallula to Steilacoom. The Ebey train ferried across the Columbia River on September 12 and reached the Puyallup River on October 4, taking twenty-two days. The Meekers likely arrived at the Columbia River ferry on September 26 and reached Steilacoom on October 20, taking twenty-four days. Losing four days in Idaho and two after crossing the Columbia suggests that they lost a week between Fort Boise and the Columbia ferry. I come down on the side of an extended rest at the Grand Ronde valley and perhaps a second delay at the Columbia ferry combined with some slowing down.

## **Sources**

Finally a word about sources. There are three Oregon Trail diaries that were written in 1854, each of which presents an eyewitness account of the events that took place that year. Anna Maria Goodell and Elizabeth Austin were heading for Washington Territory in what historians refer to as the Vermilion wagon train, named for the point of origin of

most of the members of the company—Vermilion, Ohio. The third account comes from Winfield Scott Ebey, leader of a wagon train also heading for Washington Territory, referred to by historians as the Ebey wagon train.

In addition, we have the reminiscences of three participants in the events of that year—Ezra Meeker, Maria Angelina Burr and Margaret Whitesell. Ezra met his father's wagon train on the last leg of its journey west and accompanied it back to Puget Sound. He wrote his account of the story about fifty years after the fact in his book *Pioneer Reminiscences*. As he knew the participants intimately, was an adult when the events occurred, and was an excellent historian, his account is invaluable, despite some obvious errors with dates. Maria, on the other hand, was just seven years old when she made the trip over the trail. On August 8, 2007 one of Maria's descendants visited the Meeker Mansion in Puyallup, Washington and dropped off a number of manuscripts that contained stories of the trail that Maria had related to her grandchildren. It is very likely that much of Maria's information is second hand as she was very young at the time of the journey. However she grew up with the adults who had made the trek, and she no doubt heard and repeated their stories. Her insight is also valuable, but must be treated cautiously. I will refer to these documents as the Stilley papers. (Jacob Meeker, Ezra's father, married Maria's mother, Nancy Burr, in 1855, thus making Maria a stepsister to Ezra and Oliver. Maria married Jerry Stilley in 1862.) The third participant was Margaret Whitesell who was four years old when these events occurred. She also wrote an account in her later years that must have come from stories she was told while growing up.<sup>14</sup> Margaret mixed up events of 1853 and 1854 in her telling. For example she placed Thomas Headley who came across the plains in 1854 in the 1853 Longmire train. She also stated that the Whitesell wagon was smashed to pieces while being lowered down the infamous Naches cliff when Ebey declared that Edward Jay Allen had built a by-pass around this hazard, complete with handrails for the 1854 migration. Finally Margaret attached Meeker's ox-killing story to the 1854 wagon train. Her description of the family's flight to Fort Steilacoom in 1855 at the start of the conflict with the Native Americans is quite detailed for the memory of a five year old.

Another invaluable resource is the incredibly detailed and thorough family genealogical research done by Jacob Meeker's descendant, Ken Keigley. Finally we have several old histories that have supplied pieces of the puzzle. The Reverend H.K. Hines' 1893 *History of Washington*, Hunt's *History of Tacoma*, William Bonney's *History of Pierce County* and Bancroft's *History of Washington* are four that deserve special mention.

Recently more sources have come on-line. An account written by Jacob P. Prickett of finding Clark Meeker's body and an encounter with the Meekers at the Bear River has appeared, as well as a letter describing his Oregon Trail crossing written by Thomas Spencer that was published in the *Eddyville Free Press* on December 29, 1854. Apparently, Spencer was in the Meeker wagon train from Eddyville to Steilacoom. In

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<sup>14</sup> Margaret's account written in the mid-1930s may be found in Alice Rushton, *The History of Orting 1854-1981* (Olympia: Warren's Printing, 1981), 6-23.

addition to these an obituary for Mary Leila (Lulu) Packard, a member of the wagon train has surfaced and supplied us with more information.