

LETTER OF CATHERINE SAGER PRINGLE

44 SAGER'S
 DONE ✓
 1844

CATHERINE SAGER was the eldest daughter of Henry and Naomi Sager, who started across the plains to Oregon in 1844. Both parents died before reaching the end of their journey and the seven orphan children found refuge at the Whitman mission and remained there until the massacre in 1847. The two boys, John and Francis, were killed in the massacre and one girl died a few days later. Catherine and her three sisters were brought to Oregon City with the other survivors. They could no longer be together, but were placed with different families. Catherine found a home with the Reverend William Roberts. A son of Mr. Roberts wrote to his grandparents in New Jersey mentioning by name the orphan girl who had become a member of his household. His letter was printed in the Methodist paper, the *Christian Advocate*. Frederic Sager saw it, and remembering that his brother Henry had a daughter Catherine, addressed a letter to "Catherine Sager, Somewhere in Oregon," and sent it across the plains by an immigrant. It was finally posted at Salem and there she received it. The letter printed below is Catherine's answer, giving her uncle news of herself and sisters and a vivid account of the Whitman massacre as she remembered it.

The original letter, of which this is a copy, is owned by Charles F. Keezer, Ericson, Nebraska, whose mother was a first cousin of Catherine Sager Pringle.

Salem Dec. 21 1854

Dear Uncle:

We received your letter yesterday. You can hardly realize with what pleasure we have made inquiry of everyone we saw from Ohio. You wished in the first place to know how many of us remain. There are four of us, Catherine, Elizabeth Maria, Matilda Jane and Henrietta Naomi. In the second place you asked where we were. I am married and am living on a farm four miles from Salem. I was married to Clark Spencer Pringle on the 25th of October, 1851. We own a full section of land, that is 640 acres. Elizabeth and Henrietta have been living with us ever since we were married. Matilda lives with a gentleman about 30 miles from here by the name of Geiger. She

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has lived in his family seven years. She is like a daughter to them. She will be married in the course of a few months to Lewis Hazlett. Elizabeth is teaching school. She has taught off and on for the last three years. I do not know whether she will marry soon or not. She is engaged but will not marry she says till she has made something. I will be 20 years old on the 17th of next April. E will be 18 the 6th of July. M will be 16 the 6th of October. H will be 11 the 22d of May. She was a baby 5 months old when mother died in the spring of 44. We started for Oregon in good heart and spirits about July¹ I think it was. I fell out of the wagon, the wheels passing over me broke one leg very badly. Father would not allow a doctor to be called but set and tended it himself. I have got over it now so I hardly limp at all to the surprise of all that knew me then. A lady who was present at the time told me a few days ago that she never expected to see me live. In a few days after this accident father took what they called the yellow fever, a species of the camp fever, of which he died. He put his family in care of the captain of the company and requested him to leave them at Dr. Whitmans. I was too young then to notice dates so I cannot tell you when he died, but I think it was in August². Mother's health was very feeble at the time of his death and the care of a family of seven children, one a babe and me helpless and as much trouble as an infant, besides perplexities of travelling, soon broke her down. She became delirious before she took her bed and at times was perfectly insane. The way she called and moaned and called her Henry during these spells was heart rending and I shall never forget it but, poor woman, she did not have long to mourn for in 26 days she followed her beloved husband. A few days before she died she was conscious and bid us all adieu; told us that we must be good children; she then called the driver of our team and told him to take her children over to Dr. Whitmans and he done so. She then became unconscious and remained so till she died. She died so easy no one knew for several hours that she was dead

¹The Sager family left Missouri April, 1844.

²Mr. Sager died late in August, when the company was camped on Green River.

mem 3rd Cath, Elizabeth, Matilda, Henrietta

but supposed her to be sleeping. She was buried without a coffin on the banks of Willow Creek and many tears were shed by the kind hearted company for the poor little orphans that stood around her grave. We were all taken care of by the company. There was not one but that would share their bread with us. We arrived at Dr. Whitman's the 17th of October. They could not find it in their hearts to refuse the dying request of our parents nor give a heedless ear to our urgent request not to be parted. They took the whole seven. They had no children of their own but they had orphans enough to make eleven. We called them father and mother and so they were to us while they lived. We were all fed, well clothed, and sent to school every winter. They took every means to make us happy. They employed a teacher in the family every winter. We lived there about three years and a half, that is till 47, when by a mysterious stroke of providence we were again thrown upon the wide world without home and deprived of two dearly beloved brothers and a much petted sister Hannah Loisa. The emigration of 47 brought the measles among the Indians and great numbers of them died. I have known five to be buried in one day. The Catholic priest had come among them; also Dr. Whitman had taken into his family a half breed that had come in with the emigration. This person, the priest and the measles all combined brought about the massacre. Poor Doctor rode about all day tending the sick natives and all night he was up with his family and other white folks that had stopped at his station to winter. Everyone of his family was down at once excepting the half breed I have told you of whose name was Joe Lewis, and his wife. Joe Lewis told the Indians that the Dr. was poisoning them. On Saturday night before the massacre Dr. and Mr. Spalding, his colleague, started for the Uttilla river about 25 miles from home to see some sick Indians and were gone all the next day. At about 10 o'clock Sunday night Dr. came back. My brother was setting up with us they having got well. Mrs. Whitman had been up all the night before with Henrietta who was supposed to be dying. I remember just how my dear brothers looked as, with their shoes off for fear of making a noise, they moved around waiting on us for it was the last time I ever saw them alive. As soon as the Dr. came they went to

bed. He looked at each child and when he came to Helen³ a little girl living with him, he called Mrs. Whitman and told her that Helen was dying. He sat down and watched her until she finally got better. He told Mrs. W. that an Indian named Sticus had told him that that evening the Indians were talking of killing him; that Joe Lewis was putting them up to it. He spent a sleepless night for he was in trouble. The next day, which was the fatal 29th of November, he was talking and said if things did not look brighter by April he was going to leave, but, said he "if I am to die by the hands of Catholics my death will do more good than my life."

After giving some directions reference to the children, three of whom were past hope, the little girl I spoke of above and my two youngest sisters, he went to bury an Indian. When he came back he said the Indians were gathered about but he supposed it was because they were killing a beef that day and they always came around on such days to get what was thrown away. He said that none of them were at the funeral. He went upstairs to see a young lady who was sick. He found her crying bitterly but she could not tell why. He came down and stood at the window a few moments as in deep thought and then said "poor L⁴ is in trouble and cannot tell why. I will get her some medicine and you had better go and talk to her awhile." He went to the medicine case to get some. While Mrs. W went into the pantry to get some milk the Indians crowded around demanding some. She told them to wait till she gave some to her children. She then came into the sitting room where we were and locked the door after her as the Indians were not allowed in that room. They still kept asking for the milk and Mrs. W started to get some for them. Just as she got to the door they asked for the Dr. She said "Dr. you are wanted." He went out and she fastened the door after him. Presently we heard a very loud talk in the kitchen but paid no attention to it till we heard a gun go off and immediately followed by another one. We could not tell what it was but started to run. Mrs. W called

³Helen Mar Meek, daughter of Joseph L. Meek. She died a few days after the massacre.

⁴Lorinda Bewley.

us back and started for the kitchen exclaiming "oh they have killed my husband." By this time the shooting had become general. Mrs. W brought a pillow and put it under his head. He was not dead. She asked him if he knew her. He said "yes." She asked him if she could do anything to stop the bleeding. He said no. "Can you speak to me?" He answered "no."

Mr. Rodgers,⁵ a young man living with us, now came in with his arm broken and Mrs. W was standing at the window looking out at the slaughter without when a ball hit her in the shoulder. She screamed and fell to the floor but her wound did not trouble her. It was her children. "Oh what will become of my little ones! Lord, save these little ones" came in heart rending tones from her lips time and again. I was standing looking over her shoulder a minute before she was shot but seeing the Indians trying to kill the school teacher⁶ I could not stand it and went up stairs, Mr. Rodgers carrying the sick children and then helped Mrs. W to get up. The Indians now broke into the house. After looking all over they broke in the stairway door. We placed a broken gun over the bannister as if to shoot. They were frightened and retired. For the space of an hour all was still as death except the low voice of Mr. R. engaged in prayer for the safety of all.

We now heard footsteps approaching as one in great haste. They stopped at the door and a voice called Mr. Rodgers. He did not answer. The Indian kept calling and he finally answered and asked what he wanted. The Indian told him that he had nothing to do with the massacre and wanted Mr. R to come down which he refused to do, desiring him to come up there but the Indian said that he would not; that we had white folks up there that would kill him. After much parley Mr. R. finally went to the bottom of the stairs and talked with and finally got him upstairs. He shook hands with us all; was very sorry for what had happened, especially Mrs. W being shot. He then told us he wanted us to leave the house as the Indians were going to burn it down. He appeared so kind we began to get

⁵Andrew Rodgers.

⁶L. W. Saunders.

ready to go, Mrs. W saying "God has raised us up a friend." He told us children to wait till he came back. They all went down leaving us and a wounded man but they hardly got outside the door into the yard when the treacherous mortal friend fired on them, killed Mr. R, Mrs. W and brother Francis. He had with the other children who had got well enough been in school when the massacre commenced. They all climbed into the loft. When the Indians took the other children down he stayed up there and had he only remained until night he might have escaped but his anxiety respecting his sister would not allow him to stay. He came down and the first thing he saw was his brother lying on the floor shot and his throat cut and his tippet stuffed into the wound. Francis pulled the tippet out. John tried to speak but died in the attempt. Francis burst into tears and taking sister Matilda by the hand said "I will soon follow my brother. If you are spared, be a good girl and meet me in heaven." He was shot soon after by Joe Lewis. But why dwell on these awful scenes or try to describe the night we spent in that chamber or our feeling when, next morning, surrounded by murderers we looked at the mangled corpses of our beloved second parents and our brothers.

I have given you a short account of this horrible massacre but to give you a definite idea of it is impossible. They were buried the following Wednesday in one large grave but it was so shallow the wolves dug them up before we left and their bones are scattered. About five days after this Loisa died. We lived prisoners a month when we were ransomed by Mr. Ogden of the Hudson's Bay Company. He died lately.⁷ It was with joy mingled with tears that we bid farewell to the home that had been so pleasant and the place of so much calamity. We left the graves of the loved ones behind. We arrived at Oregon City in January and were loudly saluted by the troops on their way to make war with the Indians. The war continued some time and was finally concluded by their giving five of the chief murderers who were hung in Oregon City. The poor fellows shed tears when they found they had to swing but it

⁷Peter Skene Ogden died September 27, 1854, and is buried at Oregon City.

done no good. They wanted to be shot but hanging was the law.

We all found homes right off but had to be parted. I lived with Rev. W. Roberts and was the girl spoken of in the Advocate you spoke of. I lived with them till I was married and they done well by me. Matilda has lived in the same place all the time. E. and H. have changed places several times so after all here I am settled down in sober married life and a little girl with blue eyes calls me by the name of ma.

We heard by the emigration that came the year after us that the Indians had robbed father's grave, leaving his bones to bleach on the prairie.

Perhaps you would like to know something of this country. We have had up to this time very little rain, the nights being cold, the sun shining warm and pleasant during the day. Crops are generally good. Times are rather dull there being no cash in the country. Wheat is six bits a bushel in cash and a dollar in trade. Potatoes are 25 to 50 cents per bushel. Wages are from one to two dollars per day. There is too much merchandise in the country and no public improvements. We would like very much to have grandpas dageurreotype if you would send it to us and as many more as you are able to send us. We want to know how our kin folks look. I want you to write and tell us how many uncles and aunts we have and their names. Have you any children? What are our cousins names and how many of them? What is grandpas name and what was grandmas name? How old was father when he died and where was he born; Also what was mother's age?

I did not tell you the name of our daughter. We call her Kate Virginia. I have written you a long letter but it was necessary to let you know our history. Remember us to all the relations, and tell them to write. Direct your letters to Salem, Marion Co., O.T.

To FREDERIC SAGER

CATHERINE SAGER PRINGLE

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