

JAMES MEIKLE SHARP

1852

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BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE  
EXPERIENCES

*of*

JAMES MEIKLE SHARP



1931



JAMES MEIKLE SHARP  
SUSANNA REBECCA PLANK











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At Home, Saticoy, California

October 14, 1925.

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My early recollection is of living on the bank of the Ohio River, at a point where the Hocking Creek joined the River. I recall that the older children took me twice to school, where the larger girls paid me some attention, which I



think must have gone to my head. Also, that my father found me, not over four years old, rocking a skiff lying in the water of the Hocking Creek, a stream which flowed near our home, and that he promptly applied proper treatment.

On one occasion some of the older boys, a lad of my own age named Rufus Gilbert, and I, were out a short distance when a big ram charged upon us. My brothers took me by the hands and we ran, but poor Rufus, having no help, was left to bring up the rear, and, unfortunately, was subjected to the insane fury of the ram. He was tumbled over several times, and when help arrived, was bleeding freely from the nose, but was otherwise unhurt.

My food was served on an old-fashioned pewter plate, around the margin of which in raised letters was the alphabet, and that was the beginning of the limited education which fell to my lot.

Early in 1848, my father built a flat boat, as it was called, which was something like a scow. I cannot recall that it had anything answering to a cabin, but think it must have had some



and family. These log houses were small, and one of them afforded indifferent accommodations for a family of eight. The boys of the family were mostly stored in the attic to sleep, which was a material advantage in the matter of room. For about four years we lived in this cabin, and I think my brother Louis H. was born in it. Some land to farm must have been rented so that enough corn was raised to provide food for all. The usual method of cooking was to moisten the meal with water, add a proper amount of salt, form it into "Dodgers" by pressure of the hands, then bake it. When baked, it was sufficiently hard to be entitled to the name given it, but I feel the name would be more apt if applied to the individual at whom it might have been thrown in an altercation. Hot cakes were also sometimes made, and hominy was frequently prepared from whole corn. The corn dodgers afforded a sweet and nutritious diet, but were somewhat tiresome as a regular menu. Very seldom indeed did we see wheat bread, which was justly considered a luxury. The corn had to be taken quite a distance to a wind driven grist-mill, where it was ground into meal.



During the summer and fall seasons there were wild fruits, such as plums and persimmons, also berries, which helped out the menu. Sometimes, too, we had partridges, wild ducks, and geese, also prairie chickens and squirrels of several different colors.

The two log cabins referred to had belonged to two brothers named Bridges, who had died from the effects of fever a short time before our arrival—perhaps during the preceding year. The father and mother of these young men were fairly well-to-do people living nearby, and were very kind to us, helping us in many ways.

During the four years we remained in Jackson County, father managed to accumulate some cows, also, two or three yoke of oxen, but in order to procure additional stock, wagon, and other equipment, he had to borrow \$500.00 from his brother-in-law, H. L. Turner, paying interest thereon at ten per cent. per annum, and it took quite a number of years after arriving in Oregon to finish paying the debt.

I think it must have been during the summer of 1851 that I attended a country school taught by my mother for three months. It was

reported that I cried every day and was also punished every day. I made some creditable progress, but it was some time before I saw the inside of a school house again.



## LIFE IN MISSOURI

The winters were apt to be pretty cold with plenty of ice and snow. The snow was four feet deep during the winter of 1848, and wherever there was water it would be frozen over. A good deal of the country was covered with trees and small growth, so fuel was abundant for those who were able to go out and get it. There were also runs (little streams) and creeks, which were sluggish. It was ideal for entertainment of such a bunch of boys. What with hunting birds' nests, "snapping" turtles and the other sort, squirrels, chipmunks that burrowed in the ground, wading and damming the runs, there was much to do.

Regularly in the spring we had our term of fever and ague, which was accompanied by a plentiful dosing with quinine, administered in the form of thick black syrup, tablespoonful a dose, and oh! so bitter I can taste it yet.

One winter we prepared a net, circular in form, large at one end, tapering to a smaller



size, with wings opening out at the large end. We would set this net up at a suitable place, then scour around until a covey of partridges was discovered, whereupon we would scatter and gradually drive the birds into the net, thereby securing the entire covey. Unlike the California quail, the eastern partridge covey includes the single brood of the preceding summer. Partridges were also taken by boys in figure-four traps.

One summer there came into our neighborhood two or three Indian families, which camped on a creek not far away. I recall visiting their camp, where we were greatly entertained by what we saw. They were the only Indians we had ever seen, and we were naturally very curious as to their appearance and behavior. A boy and girl of twelve or thirteen showed us how well they could swim and dive in the creek near their camp, and we were highly pleased with their performance.

Slavery existed in Missouri at this time, and we made some acquaintances with the colored people, but the younger of our members had no conception of the situation. The negroes were usually very friendly and cheerful, and



probably fared as well as their owners. I recall going one bright moonlight night to a neighbor's place to witness a corn husking. The ears had been broken off, and with the husks still on, had been thrown into an immense pile.

A lot of the negroes had come in from adjoining farms and when the time was ripe, they all fell to work on the job. The bright moonlight night, the darkies singing their weird songs while they worked presented a great spectacle. When toward midnight the job was done, two stalwart negroes made a chair of their hands and carried the owner round and round the house, all hands joining the procession and singing their native melodies. Refreshments for everybody followed, and the assembly broke up with cheers for the boss.

In the course of four years, from 1848 to 1852, my father succeeded in gathering a small number of oxen and cows, and was enabled to make preparations to carry out his long cherished intention of crossing the plains with an ox team, purposing to make his future home in the territory of Oregon.

The courage and resolution required to undertake such a journey with so large a family,



most of whom were minors and therefore dependents, and with no considerable funds, must claim our highest approval. There was lack of accurate knowledge as to distance, character of roads, the crossing of streams and mountains, and possibilities of sickness that might occur far from medical assistance. There was on the other hand almost no chance of securing food-stuffs to any extent while en route. The stream of travel was so great that but little wild game could be secured near the line of travel.

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children helped whenever we could in the preparations for the journey across the plains. Among other things, we cut wheat straw, soaked it in water until it became soft and pliable, and then we braided it in such a way that our mother was able to sew it into hats for us.

These hats served us as head covering on the journey to Oregon.

There was much to be done to prepare for the long trail across the continent. It was necessary to have a good wagon to begin with, and a good deal was done to make it as comfortable as possible. There were yokes with bows for the oxen. These yokes were mostly made from wood called Linn, which was somewhat like cottonwood, light but strong. The bows were made of hickory, very strong and enduring. Indeed, the yokes together with the bows were used many years after we lived in Oregon. There were also substantial chains, each long enough to connect from the rear yoke of oxen to the next in front. There was a tent and bedding, together with limited supplies of clothing and food, and sundry other needful articles. It will be readily seen that when, in addition to the necessary supplies indicated,



the living part of the outfit was loaded in the wagon, room was at a premium. As a matter of fact, a vast amount of walking was done by members of the family.

## CROSSING THE PLAINS

We started with six yoke of oxen, each individual having his personal name in this order, Bill and Berry, leaders, Broad and Darby, Buck and Bright, Joe and Lion, Sam and Pomp, Jack and Charley. We also had a few cows and young cattle, one or two mares, and two dogs.

Ho! for Oregon. From a Diary kept by mother, I note that we hitched up our motive power and made our start for the far west at two P. M., May 5th, '52. Traveled about ten miles, and camped. During the night a hailstorm came up, which blew down our tents and saturated everything. This was an inauspicious beginning, but later we became somewhat used to such treatment, and consented to endure what we were unable to cure. The cattle were corralled during the night, but having been turned out to graze in the morning, became separated, and, in consequence, we proceeded on the 7th with a portion of the team, while father went



in search of the lost stock. He came up with us on the 8th bringing the lost stock. The Diary showed daily mileage of 4 to 25 miles, but as there were no speedometers in vogue, the mileage was largely a matter of guess work. Total mileage shown for the month of May was 255 miles, but there were several days when no mileage was shown. During this period we crossed a number of streams and encountered a great deal of mud. Also, it rained about one day in six. The crossing of the Kansas River remains very clear in my mind. The live stock were driven into the river and made to swim to the farther shore, tho' I think they, or the larger ones, did not have to swim all the way. The wagons and humans were loaded on a ferry boat, which was propelled by three husky Indians on each side of the boat, pushing it with long poles as they walked from the bow to the stern, then walking forward and repeating the operation. The boat would drift downward considerably but I presume they would warp it up to the starting point again. Shortly after crossing we camped, and just as supper was about ready, a hailstorm came up and blew our tent down. I well re-



member how the fat in the frying pan sputtered as the rain and hail fell in the hot fat. There did not appear to be any whites at this place, altho' I saw for the first time a mud baking oven. We crossed one other stream in a ferry boat, this being the North Platte. From the time we crossed the Kansas River on the 14th of May until the 31st, we crossed a number of creeks and larger streams, and our cattle were stampeded and scattered, but soon recovered. We had a very hard rain on the 25th of May.

On the 29th of May we came upon the body of a man who had been murdered, and our party buried him. We did not learn his name.

May 31st we arrived at the Platte, or Nebraska River. Usually we made camp where there was wood, water and grass. In some instances, one or other of these requisites would be missing. In the event of a scarcity of wood, resort was had to "Buffalo Chips," sometimes known as "Bois de Vache" or "Wood of the Cow," in short the dried ordure of cattle or buffalo. Not much for campfire, but answering very well for light cooking. Shortage of grass was bad for the stock, and shortage of water was bad for all around.



During the month of June the estimated mileage as recorded in the Diary was 419, being an average of less than 14 miles per day. We crossed a number of streams and passed Forts Kearny and Laramie. On the 10th of June, we reached the upper crossing of South Platte, and camped at Ash Hollow, bordering on the Platte. This place I remember very clearly, because of the many swallows nesting on some precipitous cliffs which were near the road where we camped. We also passed some interesting formations, one of which was "Solitary Tower," another "Chimney Rock"—natural obelisks of a striking character. I think it was somewhere in this region that we had to go quite a distance from camp to get wood for fire, the wood being incense cedar, the odor, very strong yet pleasant, lingering still in my memory. We also passed thru Scotts Bluffs, a deeply eroded region. We saw buffalo and antelope on one occasion, and later had buffalo and deer meat for our fare.

Thursday, July 1st, we crossed the North Platte, the wagons and people being taken over in boats, the live stock being made to swim the stream, which was deep and swift.



Somewhere on this trip, but I cannot locate exactly, we encountered quite a company of Sioux Indians migrating. They were peaceable, as in fact were all the Indians encountered on the journey. The warriors were decked out gaily, and practically all were on horseback. On some of the ponies the squaws were riding, and on each side of such ponies a long pole would be fastened to the saddle, or in some manner that kept the forward end of the poles pretty well up on the side of the horse, the other end dragging behind. The poles were lashed together behind the horse and tenting and other material loaded on, and on top of this the papooses were riding. The men were armed with spears, bows and arrows, and very likely some had guns. They had shields made by stretching a stiff dried piece of skin, what we call rawhide, over a circular frame of wood. They also had drums of somewhat circular formation.

At another time I saw two Indian boys of 12 or 13, who came to our camp displaying their skill with bow and arrow. They ran after a squirrel that had left his hole, and as he lowered his head to enter the hole, one of



the boys, on the run, put his arrow through the body of the squirrel, the boy being ten or fifteen paces behind the squirrel.

According to the Diary of my mother, we traveled some 445 miles during the month of July. We experienced rain or hail five or six times. We crossed the North Platte by ferry, at \$5.00 per wagon, and 50c per man. Here I saw two men on the opposite shore, stripped to the waist, doing battle with their fists. It was said they were brothers. I did not care to remain to see the ending, it was too horrible for me.

July 3rd, we passed Independence Rock, a great mass of rock rising from the plain. Some of us younger members climbed to the top of it. I think brother Joseph, like many others, cut his initials in the face of the great rock. A man who had lived in that region whom I met recently, told me the initials of travelers are still plainly visible. We traveled several days along the Sweetwater, which I recall as a beautiful stream of mountain water. Much of the time it flowed over sandy bottom, with borders of grassy plats. In the 6th of July several teams stampeded, ours among the number. I



well remember how the wagon pitched along, until one of our oxen stepped in a hole, and falling, broke his neck. This brought the wild loping of the team to a full stop without serious damage.

The rough roads served us well when it came to the matter of churning the cream for butter. The cream was put in a receptacle and placed in the wagon in the morning. When evening came, we were sure to have butter.

On the 9th of July we passed over the summit of the Rockies, also, passed Pacific Springs, from which point the waters flow westerly to the Pacific Ocean. I recall a good deal of broken up equipment which had been discarded at this point.

There was much beautiful scenery between the crossing of the North Platte and the summit of the Rockies. Likewise, as we traveled west after crossing the summit, we found many streams, springs, and other objects of interest. Among the streams were little and big Sandy, Green River, Bear River, etc.

Quoting from mother's Diary, "Saturday, July 23rd, '52. Today we made about 20 miles —passed the celebrated Soda Springs which



are indeed a great natural curiosity. Our camp was in the plain near the Bluff, grazing very good. 24th. Today we made about twenty miles, crossed a great many branches, passed two splendid soda pools. The road was good, running through a beautiful valley, "abundance of good grass; tonight we made a splendid camp." During the last week in July, we continued thru similar regions—roads good and bad, usually plenty of water and some grass. On the 27th we passed Fort Hall. We crossed a number of streams and one ugly slough. The mileage footed up 445 miles, but the usual allowance must be made for guessing. Rain or hail occurred six times during July. Some portions thru which we passed in July were attractive and comfortable; much of it was sand and sagebrush, neither attractive nor comfortable.

We were now in the beginning of August, the days were growing shorter, feed was dry in many places, and the stock were losing their strength. Much of the road was poor and difficult and progress was much slower. We traveled some distance along the Snake River, a tributary of the Columbia, which had cut its



way thru a high plateau, making it necessary frequently to take the stock down the steep bank for a distance of three-quarters of a mile to get water. Often when we were stooping to drink, if we chanced to look up stream, our eyes would encounter the carcass of some domestic animal lying in the edge of the stream. It was no use to try to pass above the decaying animal for there was a continuous deposit of them. We were obliged to drink the water "as is," but apparently we were not the worse for it immediately. There was practically no wood on this Plateau, but in many places there was abundance of bunch grass, at this time quite dry. While traveling along the Snake River, father secured a fine large salmon from an Indian, and we looked forward to a good feast at supper time. There being no wood, the salmon was cut up and put in a pot hung over a fire of bunch grass, and it kept four or five boys busy to supply the required fuel. It was the first salmon we had ever tasted, and there is no doubt it was highly relished. The general character of the country after crossing the Rockies was vastly different from that lying on the Eastern side. In great



extent it was more rough and mountainous with high plateau sections. Some portions were sandy and arid or semi-arid, and occupied largely by sagebrush, which is usually found occupying land where little of anything else will grow.

By the beginning of September, we began to emerge from the indifferent region thru which we had come, and on September 1st, we drove into Grand Round Valley, a very beautiful place. The valley is circular, walled in by hills and mountains, while a stream, lined by brush and trees, flows thru it. The grass was good, and the Indian population with plenty of horses, was active and friendly.

Leaving the beautiful valley of the Grand Round we passed over the Blue Mountains, much of the road being over rough hills, some of which were unnecessarily high and steep. On the 6th of September after traveling twelve miles, we entered the Umatilla Valley, a fair and promising region, but with no white settlers. The next day is noteworthy for its entry in Mother's Diary: "This day we traveled twelve miles and encamped at the crossing of the river—Out of provisions and family sick."



Up to the 11th of September, my uncle Turner had traveled with us, but on this day he and his family remained in camp while our outfit pushed on. There was a good deal of sickness in our family, but because of short food supply, nearness of winter, and lack of funds, we were obliged to go forward.

Those who were still supplied with funds could plan to load their outfits on a steamer at The Dalles, and by going down the Columbia River, would reach Portland in three or four days. Those without funds, and in many cases, short of food supplies, were confronted with the coming necessity of driving an eighty-mile trip across the Cascade Mountains south of Mount Hood at a time when winter storms would be prevalent.

Quoting from Mother's Diary again—"September 14th—This day we traveled about twenty miles, the road being generally hilly, but hard. We camped in a perfect bed of sand by a small spring, where we arrived after dark, the greater part of us sick. Owing to the darkness, we were unable to obtain anything for fuel but green cedar, which would not burn, consequently we crept into bed supperless." We



crossed a number of streams between the Blue Mountains and the point where we reached the Columbia River. One of these streams was John Day's River. A party we had occasionally met while traveling, arrived at the crossing about the same time that we did. By some chance, a mother, daughter, and grand-daughter, belonging with this party, had, while walking, fallen behind quite a bit. So when the men arrived with the wagons they proceeded to ford the river. The stream was some three hundred feet in width, the water, flowing over a gravelly bottom, was cold and practically waist deep, tho' not dangerously swift. We children watched with interest to see what the women would do. They first tried to call to their men folks, but got no encouragement. Finally the grandmother waded in, followed later by her daughter, reluctantly also by the grand-daughter. We boys stood by and looked on. After a while we heard the daughter say "I'd give five dollars if I was where 'grandma' is" and the grand-daughter was of a similar mind. They all got across without anything worse than a cold bath, however.

From this time we made slow progress, stop-



ping in camp two different days on account of sickness, and making small mileage on other days.

On the 25th of September we arrived at Indian Creek, our road after crossing the Deschutes River having veered to the southwest in order to pass to the south of Mount Hood. I believe the place where we arrived at Indian Creek is now known as Waupenitia. Here, quoting from my mother's Diary "we bought some potatoes at a rate of \$4.00 per bushel." My impression is that we bought not more than one-half bushel or thirty pounds. We were now about to begin our trip through the Cascade Mountains, the distance to Fosters' being about eighty miles. "Foster's" was a settlement, or rather a farm house on the west side of the mountains. Our supplies of food consisted of the potatoes referred to and a very small quantity of flour.

Quoting again from the Diary: "Sunday, September 26th. This day we traveled nine or ten miles, pulled up Indian Creek Hill, one of the worst places on the roads. Our camp was made on three-mile bottom.

"Monday, 27th. This day we traveled



about nine miles, three miles brought us to 'The Gate,' in the mountains—six miles more to a small spring where we camped for the night.

"Tuesday—28th. This day we traveled about twelve miles—road good except one bad hill to come down. Our camp was in the pines near the creek. Only brouse for cattle.

"Wednesday—29th. This day we made some twelve miles over bad road, and a rainy day. Stormed all night and snowed some. Camped at foot of Summit Hill.

"Thursday—30th. We traveled about six miles. Very bad road. Rain and snow fell all day and during the night. Everything wet and cold. Family sick and out of bread.

"Friday—October 1st. Today we made some six or eight miles. Road worse but storm ceased toward night. We camped among the whortleberries—good browse for cattle and children.

"Saturday, Oct. 2nd. Remained in camp."

I think it must have been on Thursday that "Broad," one of our oxen, gave out and had to be left. Mother gave him the last biscuit from our supply of flour, but it was of no avail. The brood mare we had brought with us also succumbed to the severe weather and starvation.



Our team was now reduced to five head of oxen, so we were obliged to yoke one of the cows into the team.

Quoting again from the Diary: "Sunday, October 3rd. Traveled some ten miles, road very bad. Passed over Laurel Hill, which was steep and difficult to get down. Crossed Zigzag Creek and traveled three or four miles along its bottom and camped. Poor camp this night.

"Monday, 4th. Made about six miles, road pretty rough, but found a good camping place with plenty of grass for cattle.

"Tuesday, 5th. Traveled some ten miles, road fairly good. Crossed Sandy Creek and camped in the bottom. Good camp.

"Wednesday, 6th. Made about six miles, some pretty smart hills to pull over. Good camp in a fern opening.

"Thursday, 7th. Traveled about twelve miles, crossed Sandy again. Some of the road pretty good with a few hard hills to pull over. Our camp was near the first house we came to in the settlement.

"Friday, 8th. Drove to Fosters' and encamped, where we remained four days on account of our cattle being lost."



The roads just passed over were of the worst, the unsatisfactory condition being exaggerated by the rain and snow, which prevailed a good deal of the time. There were swampy sections, almost impassable. Some places had been improved? with a corduroy of small poles. Some of the hills were so steep that wagons were let down by using a long rope circled around a standing tree trunk. In other cases, a small tree would be cut down and fastened to the rear axle as a drag, thus retarding the movement of the wagon. The emigrants were leaving whatever they could spare to lighten their loads. I also recall seeing a good-looking wagon standing a little out of the road with a sign "Hands Off," which seemed quite unnecessary.

During the night at one of the worst camps, a woman, whom we knew slightly, passed away, and in the morning her children hitched up and drove away, leaving the husband and father behind. The husband, assisted by my mother scooped out a little depression, and succeeded in covering the body before departing. Before we were out of the mountain we met a relief train from the Willamette Valley



bringing supplies for the belated arrivals. As flour was being offered at \$1.00 per pound, and as we were on the bankrupt list, our folks didn't buy any. Some kind-hearted person, better off than ourselves, generously gave us a small supply. There being an abundance of huckleberries at hand, we gorged ourselves on huckleberry pie, which proved a life saver.

During the succeeding days up to October 16th, we crossed the Clackamas River, arrived at Oregon City, and crossed the Willamette River, thence continued westerly into the Chehalem Valley, and arrived at Mr. George Nelson's place on the 16th. At the Clackamas, the two big dogs we brought with us, known as Cass and Butler, after two eminent Democratic politicians of that date, lost their lives by eating of the dead salmon which lay along the stream.

In Oregon City father secured a loan or donation of five dollars from a worthy gentleman by the name of R. R. Thompson, which must have been another life saver.

Mr. Nelson's house was built on a gently rising ground, and as we drove slowly up the hill, the sun was about to sink behind the



western mountains. Mother and most of us children were walking, tired and nearly exhausted. Father had not been feeling well for some days, and was riding in the wagon. As we pulled up alongside the front gateway, a woman came out and asked "Isn't there a sick man in the wagon," and learning there was, had us come into the house. She put father into bed, where they kept him for about two weeks. We think now he must have had typhoid fever. "Uncle George" and "Aunt Peggy" as the Nelsons were known far and wide, were well advanced in years, and had been living in Oregon since 1848. They were examples of whole-hearted generosity such as are rarely met with in modern times. Their house was a large double affair with a roofed-over open section between. In this house my sister Julia was married to O. R. Bean in the fall of 1853.

As soon as father was able to move, we secured a house not far from Mr. Nelson's from a Mr. Morris, into which we moved November 2, 1853. I say "house," but this was an exaggeration, as it was a structure built of small logs, about twelve by sixteen feet, ac-



ording to my recollection. I believe it had a fireplace, because we could hardly have survived a cold winter otherwise. There was a loft or attic reached by a ladder, and here was the boys' dormitory during the winter. In this small building, the nine of us spent the time from November 2, '53 to February 21, '54. There was a snowfall of about two feet in depth during most of this period. Our food was a steady diet of boiled wheat, which was bought at \$5.00 per bushel, or about 8c per pound. 'Twas a strong and wholesome food, but rather monotonous.

During the winter father sold the fairly good wagon which had carried us from Missouri, for \$140.00, and this enabled us to get wheat as needed, another life-saver. The location of this place where we spent the winter of 1843-54 is very near the flourishing town of Newburg, in Yamhill County, Oregon. During this time, father had concluded to take a donation land claim on the north side of Chehalem Mountain, this mountain lying north of Chehalem Valley. He proceeded with the help of the older boys, and perhaps some neighbors, to build a small log cabin on this claim,



and on February 3, '54, moved family and stock to the same. We still had four or five head of oxen, and two or three cows and some young stock, but during the summer, we lost one or two cows by their getting mired in a swamp. Our food supply was not much improved in our new location, tho I think we grew a limited amount of garden, and had a few chickens. One of our hens stole a nest out, hatched two or three chickens, and went as completely wild as the quail or grouse. On being approached, she would make a great alarm, the chicks would hide, and the hen would make a long flight and disappear. Most of the land, where somewhat open, would be covered by thick growth of fern, as high as a man's head. It was soon apparent that the making of a farm under such conditions was a physical impossibility, and later the place was abandoned.