Pittsburgh's Part in the Oregon Trail

By Mary M. Sterrett

The "Oregon fever" had struck Pittsburgh. From the wharf the farewell shriek of the boat's whistle rose above the babble of voices and the oaths of boatswains, smoke belched from the stacks, water churned under the great wheel, and the steamer nosed downstream. Handkerchiefs fluttered farewells from deck and wharf. From somewhere on board an enthusiastic emigrant bawled,

"Oh, Susanna, oh, don't you cry for me,
I'm goin' out to Oregon wid my banjo on my knee!"

Long after the refrain had died away those on the wharf stood watching and waving until the boat disappeared beyond the bend; then they turned homeward, many, restless with the longing for adventure and fortune, to talk of when they, too, should go to Oregon.

Such well might have been a familiar scene in the Pittsburgh of the late 1840's and early 1850's, for the "Oregon fever" had spread throughout the country, and Pittsburgh was no exception. Back in 1836 two zealous young missionaries with their wives made the first successful wagon journey over the Rockies to Oregon, following the old trails of traders and explorers. Not many years later the United States' contest with Great Britain and Russia over the occupation of the Oregon Country turned attention to the Far West. Missionary, trapper, and explorer, too, had talked and written of the Oregon Country, proclaiming it excellent grazing land, a land of luxuriant vegetation, a land of farms. Oregon became the question of the day; and the New Englanders who were looking about for new farming sites, and the men of the newer states of the West, depressed by persistent "hard times",
turned toward the Far West and hope. The lure of the West gripped the nation. The excitement of the journey beyond the Rockies beckoned the young and adventurous. The old lure of the West was not dead. *Oh, Susanna* echoed in dreamy southern towns, down New England lanes, and across the muddy, rutted streets of the newer western villages. The excitement was intense. Everywhere emigrant companies were formed. Sometimes an entire village organized and set out for Oregon; again the "fever" caught an isolated family on some out-of-the-way farm where the news filtered in slowly in a round-about way. Town or single family, as the case may be, packed the prairie schooner, and set out for those magic cities—Independence and St. Joseph, Missouri—the rendezvous of the Oregon Trail.

Though the "Oregon fever" may not have been so intense in Pittsburgh as it was in many other localities, Pittsburgh, nevertheless, yielded up her victims. A few scant records divulge today the names of some of the adventurers, bits of scattered information concerning the formation of trains and the dates of their departures, and the fragmentary stories of the joys and hardships of her emigrants. From these meager sources we of the present day must weave our story of Pittsburgh's part in the Oregon Trail, using these precious gleanings as examples to be multiplied a hundred-fold.

That definite plans were made for group migrations from Pittsburgh and neighboring vicinities is shown by an article from the *Pittsburgh Christian Advocate* published in the *Pittsburgh Gazette* of February 17th, 1852. John Spencer, who, apparently, was a leader in organizing a company, writes in this manner, advising prospective emigrants:

"TIME—We expect to start from Pittsburgh. Those who meet there, can on their arrival, report themselves at the Methodist Book Depository, and be ready to start the 2nd day of April. If a boat does not leave then, we can wait. Persons below may meet us at Wheeling, or elsewhere, as may best suit. If they do not wish to go to Pittsburgh to secure passage, they can write to me and I can secure the kind of passage they desire, as I expect to be there on the second of April. We hope to reach St. Joseph, Missouri, by the 20th of April, and, if possible, procure our stock and be ready to set out on our land journey before the 1st of May.

"DISTANCE—I believe it is called 805 miles from Pittsburgh to St. Louis; and from there to St. Joseph, 513. So far we go
by steamboat. Then we rig our wagons, and begin our land jour-
ney. From St. Joseph to Oregon City in the Willamette Valley,
it is about 2000 miles. Wagons go all the way. The time re-
quired varies from four to six months, owing to diligence, load,
stock, and luck."

"Luck" had failed to smile upon numbers of earlier Oregon emigrants. News of wagons, warped and dried by rains and withering prairie sun, breaking down and upsetting the baggage in the trail, accounts of cherished possessions left by the way that the load might be lighter, stories of privation and hunger, weird tales of Indian massacre, drifted back across the mountains. That his train might not suffer the mistakes of earlier adventurers, Spencer gives explicit advice concerning all phases of preparation for the journey. He advises that all wagons be built stoutly of the best seasoned wood and according to exact measurements. Each wagon should not carry more than eighteen or twenty hundred pounds. Each vehicle must be allowed four or five yoke of oxen, four at least. Not more than four adult persons, or "children making up that much", must occupy one wagon, for the provisions for one person will weigh well on to four hundred pounds. As proper and necessary provisions for each person over ten years of age, Spencer advises the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flour</td>
<td>80 lbs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilot Bread</td>
<td>30 &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butter Crackers</td>
<td>40 &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiln-dried Corn Meal</td>
<td>25 &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bacon, side (not hams)</td>
<td>45 &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pickled Pork</td>
<td>20 &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dried Beef</td>
<td>10 &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice</td>
<td>10 &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dried Beans</td>
<td>15 &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coffee</td>
<td>4 &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tea</td>
<td>1 &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugar</td>
<td>25 &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salt</td>
<td>10 &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dried Fruit</td>
<td>15 &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various things, as a little vinegar, pepper, saleratus, perhaps some pickles, in weight, say...</td>
<td>20 &quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total** ........................................ 350 lbs.

Only the bare necessities in wearing apparel, bedding, tools, and cooking utensils should be included in the baggage. Spencer discourages carrying beds and queensware china. Each male person able to use a gun should have one "rifle gun", and a Colt's belt pistol. These, Spencer explains, may be procured at the Allegheny Arsenal upon
the emigrants’ applying and stating upon affidavit their 
\textit{bona fide} intention to go to Oregon. These latter provisions
Mr. Spencer suggests \textit{might} be needed in case of Indian at-
tack, though he has no idea that there will be any need of
fighting Indians, “if companies keep together and behave
well.”

There is no further record of the train of ’52. That
such a train was formed, went to St. Joseph, and joined one
of the larger trains there, one feels certain. Emigrants
from Pennsylvania, who, no doubt, set off on their river
journey from Pittsburgh, migrated to Oregon in that year.
In the death list of Oregon pioneers published in the
\textit{Oregon Historical Society Quarterly}, 1919, are recorded
the names of R. H. Espey and Daniel Giles, both of whom left
Pennsylvania in 1852, settled in Portland and Salem, re-
spectively, and died in 1918. Their names bear testimony
to Pennsylvania’s participation in the 1852 migration.

What were the experiences of the 1852 emigrants, we
can only surmise. Their stories were, no doubt, quite
similar to those of hundreds of other Oregon pioneers. For
all who dared the journey it was much the same: a few
blissful days of sunshine and light breezes, flower-starred
prairie, and gay hearts, followed by weeks and months of
rain and mud, burning sun and dust, desert, plain, and
mountain, and fear of starvation and Indian massacre. If
there were any who escaped all the bitter hardships, they
were lucky ones, indeed.

To judge from the letter of Quincy Adams Brooks, a
lawyer from Washington County, Pennsylvania, who left
Pittsburgh for Oregon, April 2, 1851, the 1851 train was
one of the more fortunate groups. This party, leaving
Pittsburgh at the beginning of April, succeeded in reach-
ing Olympia, Oregon Territory, September 20th, 1851.
Such time was excellent. Many parties required eight
months to reach Oregon. According to Brooks’s account
of the journey across the plains, the company of “18
wagons, about 150 head of cattle, 8 women with their chil-
dren, and 40 men fit for duty” experienced no suffering
more harrowing than the usual rains, and several stam-
pedes of stock. The first stampede, however, was an ex-
citing affair which nearly proved disastrous to the inex-
perienced drivers. On a May afternoon, when the wagons,
strung out along a mile-long line, rolled lazily over the monotonous prairie, a young mare that had lagged behind the train, finding that she was getting left behind, scurried ahead, kicking her heels and snorting. As she neared the wagons, the loose cattle grazing behind the train followed in her wake. As mare and cattle reached the line the oxen in the hindmost wagon became unmanageable. With a "frightful bawl" and "elongated tail" they, too, started out at full speed, and the stampede was on in earnest. The bawl spread from wagon to wagon the full length of the line, as frantic drivers made a rush to check the beasts. "It was indeed a strange spectacle," writes Brooks, "to see such unwieldy animals, that seemed formed by nature to move at no faster pace than a snail's gallop, traveling so rapidly—then to see the drivers endeavoring to stop them—to see, men, women, and children getting pitched out of the wagons—to hear them scream and the drivers shouting. I shall never forget the occurrence. One man got his shoulder dislocated and was otherwise badly bruised; several others were somewhat injured—some of the women were roughly handled, but no serious accident occurred." Almost without incident thereafter the train continued on its way to Oregon.

The story of Agnes Stewart and the Love-Stewart migration in 1853 forms a decided contrast to the rather pleasant journey of the train of '51. Agnes Stewart's experiences, as told in her diary, present an excellent illustration of the physical discomforts, the longing for old acquaintances, and the utter weariness of the trail. Hers is a story typical of the Oregon migration.

The Stewarts, Warners, and Loves were natives of Alleganey City, Pennsylvania. Here in old Alleganey, Agnes Stewart, daughter of James Stewart, grew into young womanhood. Here she had her friends, Mary Dawson and Martha Hay. The three girls were close companions; but between Agnes and Martha the bond of friendship was stronger. Together they kept their secrets from Mary. Together they planned what they would do when they were grown up. This friendship, however, was broken suddenly when Agnes' father, together with the rest of his family, his two married daughters and their husbands, John and Fred Warner, their younger brother
Tom, James and David Love, friends of the family, and several others, decided to migrate from Alleganey City to Oregon. Her separation from Martha loomed a tragedy in the life of Agnes. She could not live without Martha—but she did live, many years after Alleganey City had become only a hazy memory. Swiftly the time for departure drew near. Agnes bade farewell to her friends, Martha Hay and Mary Dawson. From Mary, Agnes received as a parting gift a tiny notebook, which was to become her diary of the trek across the plains.

In the back of the small diary appears a poem, not to the donor of the gift, but to Martha Hay, which is, doubtless, the first entry and Agnes' final outburst of grief:

Oh, friend I am gone forever. I cannot see you now.  
The damp comes to my brow.  
Thou wert my first and only friend, the heart's best treasure thou;  
Yet in the shades of trouble sleep, my mind can see you now,  
And many a time I shut my eyes and look into the past.  
Ah, then I think how different our fates in life were cast,  
I think how oft we sat and played upon some mossy stone,  
How we would act and do when we were big girls grown,  
And we would always live so near that I could always go to you,  
And you would come to me, and this we would always do  
When sickness came in fevered brow and burning through each vein . . . .

Here the poem ends abruptly. The first entries in the diary appear in their chronological order, relating the departure from Alleganey City on the trip down-river to St. Louis.

This first stage of the journey was without incident. The party of Pittsburgh emigrants reached St. Louis on March 25th. Here they bought their supplies; then moved on to St. Joseph. At St. Joseph Agnes experienced her first touch of homesickness, and her first horror of the trail. In the diary one finds the following entry for May 3:

"We will leave this place today and glad to get away. I cannot like St. Joseph. There is beautiful scenery here but I do not like it so well as my native hills. They were bare and shabby, but, oh dear, they were childhood's home . . . .  
"The last load to cross the river in the evening which consisted of four men and one yoke of oxen met with trouble. The ferry ran onto a root of a tree in the water and upset. All the men were drowned, and the cattle, although yoked together, swam out and were recovered next morning . . . ."

From the day when Agnes, about to take leave of civilization, made this entry, until the day when all entries stopped with the bitter hardships of mountain trails, ex-
cerpts from the diary paint a vivid picture of the typical Oregon migration with its few moments of beauty and happiness and its days and nights of grim experience and physical suffering.

"May 19 . . . It is a beautiful day. The sun shining bright and warm and a cool breeze blowing makes it very nice indeed, and it seems very much like home . . . Oh, I feel so lonesome today. Sometimes I can govern myself, but not always, but I hold in pretty well considering all things . . . .

"May 21. We started early this morning. We'll surely make a good day's travel today. A beautiful day. Lizzie (her older sister) is quite ill with some bad disease. Left Stewart's folks for good I suppose. (This refers to a sister and her husband who were some distance behind.) This seems hard to bear for mother frets so much . . .

"Ten O'clock - . . . Oh, Martha, my heart yearns for you, my only friend, and would that I could see you now. I would not ask for more for many a day,—and I had built myself on the idea that I should send and you come to Oregon. But this I pass and must submit to Providence, but oh, my friend, thou art dear to me! My heart turns to thee, thou cherished friend, for we so often cling to an idea that only gives us pain instead of pleasure . . .

"May 24 . . . . This is a long weary journey, and many weary steps we have to take before we reach the end of it. It is raining today and we cannot go on. I am very sick today with the pain in my breast. It is not any better, I wish it was day-light. We camped at a place on the Blue River where a woman was buried and the wolves had dug her up. Her hair was there with the comb in it still. She had been buried too shallow. It seems a dreadful fate, but what is the difference? One cannot feel after the spirit is flown. I would as soon not be buried as to be dug out of my grave.

"May 30. Made a short day's travel . . . Mother a little better . . . Camping on the vast prairie and in sight of the Platte River.

"May 31. Passing Fort Kearney. There has passed here 13,000 people, 3,000 wagons, and about 90,000 head of stock. It is a little village 310 miles from St. Joseph. Time seems to roll . . . . Sick today as usual. We are near the Platte River which they say is four miles wide. There is a storm now, and I am in the wagon by myself. The rest are eating their supper in the other one . . .

"Saturday. Still traveling over the plains . . . Stewart's folks sixty miles behind us. They will never catch up, and we cannot wait for them for fear of endangering ourselves.

"Sabbath, June 5 . . . The birds chirp just the way they did by the mossy old stone I have spent so many thoughtless days upon you, my truest friend, Martha. What would I give to see you now! . . . I miss you more than I can find words to express . . . .

"Tuesday, June 7 . . . Today I am 21 years old . . . No one congratulates me or anything, and I am glad of it. It is evening, and no one knows how strange one feels out here on a birthday. . . .

"Wednesday, June 8 . . . We are taking the south side of the Platte . . . We are going to cross the upper ford 36 miles
from the big Platte... We had a dreadful storm last night but good roads today, but it is very warm and looks like we were going to have another storm tonight.

"Friday, June 10. We will cross the south fork today in about an hour from now.

"Monday, 13. We had a Platte River storm last night. I scarce ever saw such a storm. All the fellows had to turn out and herd the cattle for they ran from the hail... Last night the wolves came within a short distance of the camp, and such yelling I never heard before.

"Friday, 24. It is very warm today, but there is a cool breeze blowing through the pine trees most delightful. Two days ago it was so cold that it was snowing...

"Monday, 27. It blows so hard we cannot proceed on our journey. The rain blows up in a most dreadful way...

"Wednesday, 29. Yesterday was a windy cold day, and I had to walk to keep myself warm... We had the worst roads yesterday. We had dreadful places to come down, ugly places to go up, and by the time I got out to walk up the hills and down the hills I had just as well been on my feet (all the time). I am very tired and weary. Today it seems as though it would be very warm. Oh, dear, I wish we were in Oregon, or even out of these Black Hills. I am tired of them; they are so dismal looking.

"Thursday, 30. Oh dear, we have to stay here two or three days and it will appear two or three weeks. I want to go on and never stop at all if it could be helped, but the oxen's feet are all tender, and some of them are very lame. We must stop and let them get well again. I have been sick all day.

"Tuesday, 5th (July) Such a warm day. Everyone is worn out with the heat...

From this time on Agnes' entries are shorter, less hopeful, and less regular than they have been previously.

"July 20, Sabbath. Oh, my patience! I have not wrote for so long a time I have nearly forgotten how. So many strange things and places we have come over. We have come over so many high hills. We have come up and down until I forget most of what I wanted to write. We are in the Bear River Valley now. How dreary everything looks to me. I feel like saying that life is a weary dream, a dream that never wakes..."

"Thursday, August 11. On Rock Creek tonight... we have had bad roads since we left Bear River. Traveling very slow for the roads are so rough they shake the cattle so bad,

"August 19. We are traveling very slowly.

"August 21. Sabbath. It is a beautiful day like the ones we used to have at home when we used to feel at peace when this time approached. I am very weary of this journey, weary of myself and all around me. I long for the quiet of home where I can be at peace once more..."

"August 25. One of our oxen died last night...

"Thursday, 26. Left one of our oxen yesterday, and two died last night. They are going fast, I think. I wish we were through.

"September 9. Traveled fifteen miles up the Malheur River, passed several bluffs and forded the river six times...

"September 10. Came twenty miles today, hard on man and beast. Very warm. Nothing but hills and hollows and rocks. Oh dear, if we were only in the Willamette Valley, or wherever we are going, for I am tired of this..."
"September 11. Traveled eight miles yesterday over very rough stony roads . . . Began to ascend the Burnt River Mountains, or Blue Mountains, I don't know which, but one thing I do know, they are very serious hills to come up with."

Here the diary ends. The narrative is taken up many years later by Agnes' son, M. Y. Warner, who continues the story as his mother told it to him, and as he wrote it many years after when he first copied her diary.

After crossing the "serious hills" mentioned in the last entry, the Stewart-Love emigrants came to the end of Lake Harney, or Lake Malheur. Here a dispute arose. Captain Miller, who had traveled the route before, wished to take the north side of the lake; while others insisted that they take the south side. Finally the train divided, all but Miller going on the south side. Miller, believing that the rest would turn and follow him, traveled for a day and a half on the northern shore; then, seeing that they did not follow, and fearing Indian attacks on his lone train, he set out to overtake the others. Shortly after Miller joined the main train once more he discovered that the emigrants were lost. The men could not find the marks by which they believed the trail would be blazed. Now the frightened men plead with Miller to take the lead, but this he refused to do, saying that he would follow the others until they should find a way out of their difficulties. Miller's attitude almost caused a panic. Some demanded that he lead. Others as stoutly defended him. There were threats of hanging him unless he agreed to lead; but finally their anger cooled, and the anxious men set out westward to reach the valley before their supplies should become exhausted, and winter should set in.

There followed days of traveling over endless deserts and hills. Sometimes they had water; sometimes not. Sometimes there was grass; more frequently not. Oxen weakened and died. Provisions ran low. Still the train carried on. At last they came in view of the Cascade Range, a welcome sight to the travel-weary caravan. It was the "home stretch" of the long trek. Could they have known what the crossing of the Cascades held in store for them, the Pittsburgh emigrants would not have advanced so boldly upon their last barrier. Miller, who was now leading, hoped to guide them into a new trail, a shorter route to the Columbia. Two years before, when Miller,
who had been to Oregon, returned east for his family, this new route had been a blazed trail. Now he expected to find a rough wagon road. At the Deschutes River, about three miles above the present city of Bend, the train came upon the new route, still a blazed trail. Provisions were almost exhausted, winter was closing in; they must get through or starve. And they must make their own road over the mountains! Everything that possibly could be spared was thrown away to make the load lighter. Day after day, from dawn until dark, the men worked, felling trees, and coaxing the teams over the newly-made road. Finally they reached the summit of the mountains and headed down the Willamette Valley. The way became rougher. Oxen stumbled in their traces. Exhausted women dragged along frightened and hungry children. The men anxiously eyed the back trail, and cast apprehensive glances at the steep and thickly forested slopes ahead. It became almost impossible to manage the wagons. The supplies would run out long before the wagons could get through to the settlements. In desperation the emigrants abandoned their wagons, and, with what little of their possessions they could carry on their backs, set out down the Willamette Valley. Somehow, word of the starving train reached the settlers of the Upper Willamette Valley, and they immediately gathered supplies, placed them on horseback, and sent Squire Powers to the relief of the emigrants. On the way Powers met four men who were hurrying ahead of the party in the hope of securing supplies and returning to the main group of the train. The men turned back with Powers to aid the women and children, who were hurried forward, while the men returned to bring down the wagons. Thus the Pittsburgh emigrants reached the Willamette.

There beyond the Rockies, in that fabulous land of Oregon, Agnes remained to teach the Indian the white man's religion, to marry young Tom Warner, and to rear her family. The maid of Old Alleganey became the true pioneer woman, accepting without complaint the life of the frontier with its few joys and many hardships. Through all the years of toil in that land so distant from her native hills, she never lost her gentle beauty of character, never failed to comfort with her fine wisdom, never forgot the
works of Robert Burns, which she knew by memory and recited many times to amuse her children and grandchildren. There in Fall Creek in the Oregon Country Agnes Stewart lived to its close the life of the Oregon pioneer. Today three sons—Clyde and George Warner of Fall Creek, and Mason Y. Warner of Eugene—proudly claim the heritage of their mother's pioneer spirit.

Pittsburghers who revel in their historic old city, dreaming of the frontier town with its haggard, wild-eyed refugees of the border wars, its Indian runners who slipped quietly into town at dusk and as quietly glided away into the forest at dawn, its smoke-belching packets and roistering boatswains of the early steamboat days, well may add to their dreams the strains of Oh, Susanna, the rain-drenched prairie, the glare of sun on the hard-baked soil of the plains, and the prairie schooner, heaving from side to side in the clouds of glinting dust, its canvas top, tinted faintly red in the rays of the setting sun, billowing in the breeze.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

*Going to Oregon* (from the Pittsburgh Christian Advocate), Pittsburgh Gazette, February 17, 1852.

John Spencer, a leader in organizing emigrant groups in the vicinity of Pittsburgh, answers here the questions asked him by prospective emigrants. In a matter-of-fact yet interesting fashion he gives explicit information concerning the building of the wagons, the necessary supplies, time, and distance. His article is a veritable mine of material for the chronicler of the Oregon migrations.


The diary of Agnes Stewart, native of Alleganey City, Pennsylvania, is edited in its entirety, and is accompanied by a concise but sympathetic narrative of her early days in Alleganey City, and her later years in Fall Creek in the Oregon Country. The girl Agnes wrote well, thus making the diary not merely a series of notations concerning the advance and welfare of the train, but a stirring portrayal of the yearnings and the heartaches of a young girl torn from her girlhood companions and transported to a new and strange land beyond the mountains. The Agnes Stewart diary forms the foundation for the story of Pittsburgh's part in the Oregon Trail.


The letter of Quincy Adams Brooks, a lawyer in Washington County, Pennsylvania, provides a vivid narrative of his entire trip from Pittsburgh to Oregon. Mr. Brooks's account of the journey differs from the usual narrative in that it is not a chronicle of grim experience.