

I CAME TO OREGON IN A COVERED WAGON

By Lois Parke Fretwell¹

On May 21, 1923, at Weiser, Idaho my parents, James Elbert and Elizabeth Parke, myself and three of my five sisters set out for a new location in the fruit growing regions of Oregon in a covered wagon where, in Mamma's words, "there would be work for the girls." I was 19 and had just graduated from high school. My sister Agnes was 16, Mary 14, and Mabel 7. The wagon was pulled by a high strung team of black horses. That early May morning as cars passed us Bess and Prince danced and stepped high but by noon the cars could buzz by without a quiver from either horse.

We left most of our possessions behind because weight had to be kept at a minimum. The wagon was packed with our clothes, three bed rolls, a tent, campstove, two joints of stove pipe, a twenty-five gallon barrel of water, a grub box, food, a tub and washboard, axe, shovel and other small tools. Also a sack of oats and two bales of hay for the horses.

The grub box was a box with a lid, placed in the back of the wagon where it was easy to open, packed with staples such as flour, salt, sugar, lard, canned milk, oatmeal mush, bacon and the sour dough crock filled with sourdough.

For those who don't know, a sourdough crock is a half-gallon stone crock. Sourdough starter is made by filling the crock about half full of raw milk and thickening it with flour. Let set until it sours. To make biscuits fill a milk pan (a flat pan 12 inches in diameter and 3 inches deep) with flour, make a hold in the center of the flour and pour in some sourdough, sprinkle on some soda, working it through the dough then work in enough flour to make the dough easy to handle. Roll out, cut into biscuits and bake. Mama didn't bother to roll out the dough, she just pinched off a piece of dough and formed a biscuit. The biscuits were big and thick, in words of us kids, "They had lots of crumb and little crust." They also had yellow spots caused from the soda not dissolving. This did not affect the taste but I could never eat those spots when I was a child. Years later I learned that wetting the soda with a little water prevented them. The amount of soda used was determined by how sour the dough was. A whiff told one exactly how much soda to use. Shepherders keep their sourdough in their bed roll to keep it cool so it wouldn't always get too sour. The more it is used the better it is. Always keep a little back for a starter. Each time the starter is used it must be replenished with fresh milk and flour.

Back to our trip. At noon that first day we stopped on a sand bar on the bank of the Snake River. We had traveled about ten miles. I remember we had boiled potatoes, back, gravy and sourdough biscuits for lunch. (No protein but lots of calories.) The bacon was sliced thick and not all the fat cooked out of it. I still shiver when I think of how mamma cooked bacon but it was the way papa liked it. He lived to age 80 and the only time I can remember him having a doctor was when he broke his leg when I was a very small child just barely old enough to remember it. The camp stove was approximately thirty inches long made of sheet iron divided into a fire box and an oven. The oven heat was controlled by the amount of wood in the fire box. We used sage brush for fire wood.

The horses on this journey always received first consideration. We were entirely depended on them for the next six weeks. They were fed and watered morning and noon. At night they were fed, watered, allowed to roll, curried and had their feet inspected by Papa. While Papa was busy with the horses, the rest of us had duties to perform. Mamma did the cooking. We girls helped her, set up and took down the tent, greased the wheels of the wagon, gathered fuel for the stove, and washed the dishes, packed and unpacked the wagon. On this journey we girls never bickered with each other about who did what chores as we had at home because Papa was always too near.

There was no such thing as a sleeping bag in those days but we had bed rolls made of a sheet of canvas about a foot longer and wide than a quilt. A couple of comforts were spread on the canvas, a double blanket and two more comforts. A comfort was like a quilt, only heavier. They were put together in such a way so that they could be rolled or unrolled in a very short time.

Since the horses must be saved, Agnes, Mary and I had to walk on the upgrade. So besides coming in a covered wagon we also walked a good part of the way. On the steeper grades Mama and Mabel also walked. On the down grade we could sit in the wagon and read "Ladies Home Journal," "McCall's," "Pictorial Review," plus the Western magazines published in 1923. "Argosy" is the only name I remember. There were also a few paperbacks² usually found in drug stores. Two that I remember were, "A SLOW TRAIN THROUGH ARKANSAS," and "KIT CARSON ADVENTURES."

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A SLOW TRAIN THROUGH ARKANSAS was the humorous philosophy and witty sayings of a rural Arkansayer. He believed in accepting things as they were and making the best of them. The only saying I remember after all these years is, "What is time to a hog?" It comes to mind fairly often since I retired.

Papa always inquired about road conditions and camping spots ahead and possible supplies of feed and water for the horses. He bought hay in the field from farmers who were haying. It cost twenty-five cents for enough hay for a day.

We camped for the night when we found a good place after four o'clock in the afternoon. Camping spots were not hard to find. Often we stayed in a town and sometimes near a farm house. Once when it was raining we slept in a farmer's barn and were given milk and vegetables from the garden. The towns still had a watering trough and hitching rack in 1923. The one in Medford was just off Riverside, on the bank of Bear Creek, back of the buildings that faced Main Street.

In the towns we always had visitors who were curious or nosy. We were looked upon with suspicions and thought to be gypsies. Horse traders often appeared. The first thing they did when arriving was look in each horse's mouth then tell Papa how old they were. Pap never committed himself as to their age. He just smiled and agreed. These horsetraders always had a much better horse to trade for one of ours but they were given no encouragement to produce their better horse. There was no better judge of horse flesh than Papa and he knew all the tricks of the trade and was not about to be taken in. If Papa had appeared interested in trading, I wonder, what kind of horse flesh would have been brought forth? Possible none. They may not have had a horse but just a line of talk.

At Pendleton Mama and Papa decide to visit Milton-Freewater before continuing on west. It was a fruit country and a possible source of work for the girls. Mama believed in everyone working. There were no drones around her and any work that brought in a penny was acceptable. The cherry harvest was in full swing. As we drove down Main Street there loomed up in front of us a street car push a box car loaded with cherries. The horses went wild with fright and began pitching and backing away from it but Papa was an expert in handling horses and was in control. In less time than it takes to tell he had given each horse a cut with the whip and ordered them to stand still. They were shaking and trembling but were standing still just the same. We spent the night there and returned to Pendleton the next day and continued on our way west.

At LeGrande we started up the Blue Mountains. It was a long steep slow drag. We stopped often to give the horses a breather. Mama and we girls walked. At that time the road was closed during the winter months and at the summit the road had just been open a few days. There were many small mud holes and one large one with cars were unable to get through. There were two men there with teams pulling the cars through the mud but it was a slow process and the line of cars was growing longer all the time. It was a delay of several hours. As Pap pulled out to go around the line of cars men came running up to the wagon waving bills at Papa wanting him to pull them through the mud. Papa considered the well being of the horses more important than the money he could make so we continued on, for once passing the cars much to their disgust. We camped over night at Meacham on June 1. It froze ice that night.

At that time the only paved road in Oregon was from The Dalles to Portland and Highway 99 south. Since pavement was hard on the horses' hooves we turned south at Arlington with Fossil as our destination and then to Klamath Falls.

This was by far the most interesting part of our journey. Central Oregon at that time was very much a wilderness. The roads were more fitted to wagons than cars so we saw very few cars and not many people. People in the towns didn't look upon us with suspicion. We were told in Arlington when we inquired about the road south that we would have to camp one night without water. When we arrived at the last watering place before the dry camp water was put into everything that would hold water and from then on not a drop was wasted. Dishes were not washed the evening and morning of the dry camp, the horses were rationed, we all washed in the same pan of water.

Two incidents worth mentioning happened after we turned south. It was time to stop for the noon rest so Papa pulled off the main road by a placid little stream of water to what appeared to be a ford to let the horses drink but

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just as they were ready to step into the water, Papa, ever alert to danger, pulled back on the reins and gave the horses a command to back. They had barely reached the edge of quicksand. The jerk on the rein and the quick command cased the horses to struggle and back to safety. Once more Papa's quick command of a situation averted a tragedy.

Somewhere between Arlington and Fossil we passed by a deserted town surrounded by sage brush. As far as we could see it was completely uninhabited but completely intact – a typical western town, unpainted false front buildings and board sidewalks. A dozen or so dwelling houses. Some small but several were two-story T-shaped unpainted buildings. Some were surrounded by picket fences. Tumbleweeds were tumbling down the dirt streets. There were no farms near nor any signs of civilization. We never knew the name of this town. Why had it been built and why deserted? There must have been water there but there was nothing growing, not even an old-fashioned yellow rose bush.

Crescent and LaPine both consisted of a store and Post Office. It was at LaPine that we met the last of the horse traders. We had just stopped to make camp for the night when three of them arrived and from the signs they had been drinking. They were argumentive and insisted on a trade although they didn't have a horse with them to trade. They finally left saying they would be back. Of all the horse traders we met they were the only ones that left Papa with a feeling of uneasiness. He felt they might be back after dark to do the trading by force so we packed immediately and traveled a good many miles before making camp for the night. Papa didn't sleep much that night. My youngest sister, Mabel, not understanding what was going on, asked Mary what it was that those men wanted. Mary, the tease, answered, "They wanted you."

We camped one night at Beaver Marsh. When I pass through Beaver Marsh in recent years I have a feeling of sadness when I remember the beautiful spot where we spent the night so many years ago. It was a lush meadow with a quiet stream meandering through it, surrounded by virgin forest. We girls played and fished until dark which was also bedtime. About midnight we were awakened by the terrifying screams of a cougar, or whatever animal it is that screams in that blood-curdling manner, close by. For the second time the horses went wild with fear. They began squealing and trying to jerk loose from the wagon where they were tied. Papa jumped out of bed and began building a fire while talking to the horses trying to quiet them. As the flames became visible the scream died away in the distance. We kept a fire going the rest of the night.

1923 was the summer that the route for the railroad between Eugene and Klamath Falls was being surveyed. We were never near enough to see any of the survey camps but we were within hearing distance of them several times.

We spent two days in Klamath Falls.

On July the third we girls walked up the east side of the Greenspring mountains, the last walking we did. We camped that night at Tub Springs and dropped down into the Rogue River Valley on the morning of July 4, 1923. Ashland was celebrating. Main street was lined with people who had been watching the parade, when we came along making the second parade of the day.³ We created as much interest as the first one. We camped that night on the banks of Bear Creek, near the town of Phoenix and continued on the next day to a friend's farm near Jacksonville which was the end of our trek.⁴

In 1926 I married James R. Fretwell. I spent most of the next 40 years of my life in the Rogue River Valley.⁵

Agnes married Frank Breen in 1925 and lived near Butte Falls until the beginning of W.W.II when they moved to Vancouver, Washington where Frank died.⁶ Later she married Alfred Nelson and lived in Montana for a year before returning to Medford where she lived until her death in 1974.

Mary married Paul V. Algeo in 1926 and lived for two years in West Virginia then returned to Medford and except for a few years living in Copco, California and Prospect, returned to Medford in 1944, and is still living there at the present time.⁷

Mabel graduated from Medford High School with the class of 1934. In 1935 she married James Arthur Peak and went to Seattle to live. At present she lives in San Jose, CA.⁸

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My sister Margaret⁹ and her husband Theo Johnson joined us in Jacksonville in the spring of 1924 and lived there until her death in 1954. At different times she was city librarian, clerk of the Jacksonville school district and clerk in the post office.

Are you asking, “Why did we come by team?” I don’t really know except my parents didn’t do things the easy way. It would have been cheaper to come by train. We had a means of transportation after we got here that we wouldn’t have had if we had come by train. Papa traded the horses for a Chevy car soon after we settle in Jacksonville. I learned to drive that car. There was an advantage in coming by wagon that I didn’t realize for some years and that was I learned the geography of Oregon. We had a road map which we girls studied while we were riding. We located all the creeks and rivers we followed, also what towns were on what rivers. The county seat of each count we passed through. You don’t forget a mountain you walked up, a stream you followed for miles, or a mountain peak you looked at for days.

As I look back on my life I am glad I had this experience.

-Lois Parke Fretwell

Transcription and Notes by Michael J. Peak (nephew)

1. Originally written in about 1986, this account has been transcribed as written, except for some minor spelling, punctuation and grammatical changes to preserve readability. Much of the idiosyncratic spelling (‘bed roll’ and ‘sage brush’) was left unchanged. One editorial change was to move one sentence (“ . . . we girls never bickered . . . “) to the end of the previous paragraph to maintain narrative flow and sequence. Another change was to move the sentence (‘I spent most of the next 40 years . . . “) from the end of its place in the previous paragraph to become the second sentence of the next. Otherwise the narrative is little changed from the original.
2. The paperbacks Lois refers to are probably the pulp paper books produced then, which were about 9- by 7-inches, the size of a trade paperback today. The modern paperback, introduced in 1945, is smaller, measuring about 4- by 5-inches.
3. Mabel, remembering the exciting day, said, “I always believed that they had gathered to see us arrive, and to welcome us.”
4. The Parke Family found work in Jacksonville, then a ghost town after its heyday as a gold rush boomtown in the early 1850’s. It remained a ghost town until late in the 20th Century. The Parkes lived at the large old Bybee house north of town on the Old Stage Road, where James was the farm manager, and Elizabeth was the cook and housekeeper for Mr. Bybee. Later Jim drove stage for a time on this road between Gold Hill (near Grant’s Pass), through Jacksonville, to Ashland. They lived in Jacksonville until Mabel graduated from the local grade school, after which they moved to Medford to a small house on Howard Ave., near the mill where Jim was the night watchman. After Jim passed away in January 1939, Elizabeth bought a small house on Fir Street, then another on 13th Street in Medford, where she lived until she went into the Jacksonville old folks’ home in 1953, where she died in 1954, age 77.
5. Lois Parke Fretwell was a schoolteacher for most of her life, first in Jacksonville, and later in Eugene. When she retired she moved to Milwaukie, where she lived independently in an apartment until just a few months before her death at age 98 in Forest Grove, OR.
6. Before the Breens moved to Vancouver, they rented a house in Seattle down the street from where Mabel and her husband Art lived with their children. The Breens were there on December 7, 1941 when she heard the news. Their son Tom was serving in the Navy at Pearl Harbor aboard the Cruiser U.S.S. California and survived the attack and the war. Frank died in 1942, and Agnes in 1974, age 68.
7. Mary passed away in 2001, at the age of 96. At the time of her death, she lived in her house on 14th Street, just behind the house her mother once owned.
8. Mabel moved from Seattle (where Art’s family lived) in 1955 to Cupertino, later San Jose. Art passed away in 1963. She worked at the Cupertino Courier newspaper, and later retired from the San Jose Mercury News in 1983. She moved back to Medford in 1989 after the Loma Prieta Earthquake, and died there in 1991, short of her 75th birthday.

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9. Margaret (Maggie), the oldest sister, and husband Theodore (Pat) lived and died in Jacksonville. Maggie died in 1954, age 56, and Pat in the 1980's.
10. Grace, the second-oldest sister, lived in eastern Oregon with her husband Homer Jackson (also born in Middle Valley). They owned jewelry stores in Weiser, Nyssa and Vail. She died in 1970, age 69. Homer lived to be over one hundred years old.