

HOW WE CAME TO OREGON

by

John Hamilton McClure

(The author was eight years old when he crossed the plains in 1853.
The following was written when he was seventy years of age.)

"It was in 1853 we came across the plains,
And of the group who formed the train but three of us remains.
And time is passing swiftly by
And we are growing old
So anything we wish to tell had better soon be told.

"In Knox County, Indiana, my story will begin
And nearly all the company were more or less of kin.
And we, at least the most of us,
Started from Shaker Prairie
And at that time it was sickly there - - -
A hot bed for malaria.

"And milk sickness and other things too numerous to mention
So sickness and hard times, no doubt, first drew our folks attention
So stories of a goodly land
Toward the setting sun,
And they resolved to seek that land.
It was called Oregon.

"They sold their homes and household goods,
And bought some cows to drive
Along with them to have a start of stock when they arrived.
They rigged ox teams and wagons and spent a week or two
In training of the oxen for the work they had to do.

"But when all ready for the start
We told our friends goodbye,
We could not then our feelings hide,
Tears were in every eye.
For we were going far away, Ah, would we see them ever?
Our hearts and minds both seemed to say,
No, we will see them, never.

"But to the Wabash four miles off we went without delay
We ferried over to Illinois and through it took our way.
We came to little Wabash, and there I remember well.

"A crowd was gathered on its bank to look for one who fell
 Into the river at that place and so he had been drown.
 They drew him out as we passed by, showing that he was found.
 But we were traveling strangers, so tarried not nor grieved
 With those who wept, o'er their loved one, with those who were bereaved.

"We traveled on through Illinois until at last we stood
 Upon the Mississippi's bank and gazed across the flood.
 We saw St. Louis over there, a city of renown
 And a great stream ferry ready to take us to the town.

"So on to it our little train, stock, teams and people ride
 And soon we're ferried safely o'er to the Missouri side.
 A few days more we tarry at St. Louis to outfit
 For a long and tedious journey
 Ere we saw the last of it.

"And here we bought our tickets for the place called St. Joe, (now Omaha)
 There we'd leave the steamboat and then by land we'd go.
 Well, we started on the steam boat, with all that we possessed.
 The boat was named the Kansas
 And perhaps it did its best.

"But after days of riding thus, our folks were well aware
 That with all the puffs and whistles they were not getting anywhere.
 So they held a consultation, deciding to debark.
 They surely could, with their ox teams, out-travel this old ark.

"They had stuck on many a riffle and scarce the current could stem,
 So they landed us at Weston, and we saw the last of them.
 From Weston then we started on the Missouri side,
 And from there, slow going oxen, gave us a faster ride.

"At first we saw some forest trees, along the route we passed.
 But prairie soon was all we saw, all covered with tall grass.
 And so on into Kansas, and as far as we could see
 T'was open grass-clad prairie with scarce a bush or tree.
 Except along the river's bank some trees or willows grew
 And now and then a small oak grove, or lone oak tree or two.

"We had left the settled country 'er we crossed Missouri's line
 And Kansas had no settlement, although the land was fine.
 So for a time we traveled thus, the country much the same
 No life, save with the travelers except the fleeting game.

"One day some reckless traveler, a smoker no doubt,
 Dropped fire into the prairie grass and failed to put it out.
 It spread and now a sea of flame, the prairie soon became,
 And people hurried everywhere to shun the scorching flame.
 The wind drove it away from us, and thus the danger passed.
 Through many dangers after that we came out safe at last.

"We had a storm on the Little Blue, 'twas the first we tumbled to
 We had pitched our tents down on the low land,
 Our wagons on higher bank did stand.
 As the day had been quite fair and warm, we little thought of
 a coming storm.
 But when bedtime came we all lay down and soon were sleeping quite
 profound.

"A storm came o'er us of wind and rain
 And yet we still did in our sleep remain.
 But the tents blew down and we awoke, to find
 What was to us not a joke.
 The water running 'round our bed and rain still falling overhead.

"Then we gathered in haste, no doubt, our beds and tents and
 waded out
 To the wagons on the higher bank
 But sleep was done, and we felt quite blank.
 'Tumbled to' I said, Well, that is well said,
 For that is the way we got out of bed.
 The tents had tumbled, the wagons too seemed trying the same to do.
 Chained down to stakes the wagons were
 To keep them from blowing everywhere.

"When morning came, the rain was done
 And clear and bright arose the sun.
 The flowers and grass looked clean and new
 Along the banks of the Little Blue.

"We journeyed again, in Kansas yet.
 All things went well, naught to cause regret.
 The Kansas border, I never knew to where we crossed it,
 I'll not tell you.
 The next thing that happened of any import
 Was at Larime River and near that fort.
 It was late when we got there, so camp was made.
 And we soon found out we would be delayed.
 For there were many trains had arrived before,
 And were waiting their turn to be ferried o'er.
 And for several days we did have to wait
 Our turn of arrival according to date.
 They swam the loose stock but the herders did ride
 On horses behind them to the other side.

"One horse threw his rider out in mid-stream
 And there in the current he'd drown it did seem.
 For we all could see that he could not swim,
 And it looked like his chances were very slim.
 But the current washed him in near the bank
 And a man caught his hair as the third time he sank.

"And quickly he drew him up on the shore
 There he was revived so the peril was o'er.
 And the teams got across as soon as they could.
 And we traveled on to the land that was good.
 In our prairie schooner we sailed right on
 For the part called 'Willamette' in Oregon.

"You may brag about your horses that you guide with lines and reins.
 But give me the spotted oxen that we brought across the plains.
 It requires too much rigging to prepare your horses to pull
 And too many strings to hold to - - - you have your hands too full.

"But the ox yoke is quite simple, on his neck behind his horns
 While the bow completes the circle, and his throat and neck adorns.
 Hook the bow into the gooseneck on the end of the wagon tongue
 And your team is hitched all ready to draw the load along.

"Buck and Tom and Ben and Nigger, and the wheel yoke, Ball and Bright.
 They were very gentle, you could ride them too all right.
 The men would often chew tobacco, and the boys and girls chew gum
 But those oxen chewed the cud, sir, and winked at us like a chum.
 Then I'll praise the good, true cattle that were hitched with yokes
 and chains
 The long-horned, spotted oxen that brought us across the plains.

"We reached the Platte River and nothing went wrong.
 For a week we journeyed the south side along.
 And now I think that I will tell you that we had a storm as we came
 up the Platte.

'Twas the middle of the afternoon, and the date was the first of June.
 We noticed the sky was overcast
 With very dark clouds that flew very fast.
 Our Captain had ridden on ahead and found a camp that would do, he said.
 We hurried along to reach that camp
 E'er the storm came on and made things damp.

"The wind met us too, it was quite a gale,
 Camp a mile off - - - it began to hail.
 For the hail struck them full in the face,
 And it was hard to keep them in their place.
 The hail as it fell was round and plump, like good-sized marbles, and
 when they would thump
 Them upon their backs or on their heads,
 They little cared for what the teamsters said
 But would try to turn themselves around and
 To take the back track of their route.

"And one teamster's hat blew off, and then he cut some queer capers
 and then
 He would place first one hand on his head
 And then the other one in its stead.

"The camp was reached and the teams turned loose
And all the stock did quick vamoose.

"And the people were sheltered until the blast
And the fury of the storm was passed.
The cattle all loosed were driven before
The storm three miles e're it had passed 'ore
It was true, many another storm we had
But never one that was quite so bad.

"There were two roads leading up the banks of the Platte.
One runs on this side and the other on that.
Fording was dangerous, the river was wide,
People seldom crossed to the other side.
But at one time a train thought to cross over
From the south side of the treacherous river.
When they got to the middle something broke
On one of the teams, it was a tongue or a yoke.

"But just what it was we could not see or tell
But pretty soon the people began to yell.
And the teams behind passed around and before
And struggled along toward the other shore.
And the men at the wagon were working to mend
The thing that was broken. Their shouts did blend
With the cries of the children and women's screams
Men yelled at each other, and then at their teams.
The danger was, the sand was washing away,
Under the teams and wagons it refused to stay.
They could see that they all were surely sinking down
And it looked very much like they would drown.
But the thing was repaired and with strokes and shouts
They persuaded the oxen to pull them out.
Though the struggle was hard, they landed at last
And they were all safe and the danger was past.

"A scene of another kind I will draw
A scene that was true, for we surely saw
What I now record but the time and place
My memory does not so truly trace.
We were near the Platte but had not left it yet.
We were in the hill sand. Our camp was set
On a little creek, twas a pleasant place with shade and sun, wood,
water and grass.
It was Saturday night and when Sunday came,
We never traveled - - - or that was our aim.

"So on the morrow we took a short walk
Up the creek a ways and did chat and talk.

"We had not gone far when we saw a mound
Standing perhaps three feet above the ground.
And it must have been twenty feet across.
When we first saw it we were at a loss
To know why this mound should be out there.
But when we were near it we were aware
It was the grave of many, large and small
Who had suddenly died and were buried all
In haste in this mound they were covered o'er
With some three feet of dirt or perhaps with four
And the wolves had digged many skeletons out
And their skulls, detached, were scattered about
Arm bones with the fingers, leg bones with feet
And some of the skeletons almost complete.

"And we guessed that fifty people or more
Were thrown in a heap and then covered o'er
And we did not doubt that the cholera was what had taken their
lives away.
For the year before this, plague had slain
Many people out of many a train.
And I tell you this to show how great
Were the risks of these who did emmigrate.

"And the Indians had killed many people, too.
Perhaps the worst Indians had been the Sioux.
We saw many of them as we came along
But they did not hurt us; we were too strong
For almost all the way the road was lined
With the people of many trains combined.
Our folks stood guard on the way every night
And always were prepared to give them a fight.

"But we leave the dead and the Indian foe
And look now and then for buffalo.
We are in their range and their meat is good.
And the men liked to kill them whenever they could.
A small band met us and passed us one day.
I think two were killed and one got away.
But further on it was planned to lay by,
Rest the stock, hunt buffalo, then was the cry.
So up some creek and off of the road
We made a good camp and there we abode.
They made a success in killing of meat.
And as I have said it was good to eat.

"A few days we rested and then traveled on
Through heat and dust till the summer was done.
We saw Chimney Rock, it was quite a sight,
For it stood a column of very great height.

"The top had broken and tumbled down
And it lay scattered on the ground.
We went through the hills and back on the Platte
Traveling up it again a while after that.
Till we came to a toll bridge
There we crossed over and soon we left it
And saw it no more.

"We went from the Platte over onto Sweet Water,
But the water was hot. But it might have been hotter
For we found we were close to the Devil's Gate
And on this river, the guide books state.

"We went around it by climbing a hill
And when we came down we kept quite still.
We saw nothing of this hardened old sinner
So we built a fire and cooked our dinner.

"And that night we camped on the river's brink
And the men shot muskrats, but they would sink:
Though they saw many rats swimming about
The hunters for none, and the sport played out.

"The next day we passed Independence Rock.
And many climbed over it, quite a flock
Of men, women and children wanting to see
All they could of this rock of liberty.
Well, the rock was large and not very high,
It was rounded on top and the road went by.
Between it and the hill, the rock next to the stream
Was a cliff three hundred feet high, it did seem.
Between it and the hill, the rock next to the stream
We scarcely would have noticed it but for the name
In the guide books that told where it was, just the same.

"The Green River desert in time we came to
And to do without water would be something new.
But they thought we could stand it, for the best
To travel at night, and at midday rest.
And so we made progress as fast as we might
Until we got over - - - Green River in sight.

"From the top of the highland we saw the stream
But now it was hard to control the teams
Fully three miles off they smelled the water
And each thirsty ox became a trotter.
And down that long mountain it was no child's play
To keep them from bolting and running away.

"But safely we got to the bottom and then
They were loosed from the tongue and all the men
Tried to unchain them from one another
But they would not wait for any more bother.
But rushed to the stream, and the banks were steep
And the current strong, and the river deep.

"The hind ones hooked the front ones over the rim
And into deep water they had to swim.
So some were swimming while those on the brink
Held back, but all were trying to drink.
Its a wonder they did not all go up the spout
But at last were full and were all helped out.

"And they must have been full clear up to their snout
It was funny to see how their stomachs stuck out.
They hitched up again and traveled on down
Along the river till we saw quite a town
Of wagons and tents and people too
So we made camp, it was all we could do.

"And we waited there till that great train
Could be ferried o'er and start on again.
And I think three days we had to stay
Before we got over and went on our way.

"Two cables from bank to bank did swing
Two boats did many a boat load bring
Across that river, but failed to keep pace
With the teams as they came to that busy place.
But the ferry made money, I should say
Eight dollars a wagon, we did pay.

"The loose stock did swim to save expense.
And when all were over, we traveled hence.
Up a branch of the river, our course we take
And then to Bear River, which runs into Salt Lake.
Raft River, it seems, was the next we were on:
And that we soon left, you see.

"But the road forked there, one to Oregon went
The other was for California bent
An uncle and aunt had chosen to go
To the Land of Gold, to get some, you know.
A very big heap of nuggets and dust
So their cry was "California or bust."

"We traveled on to the land of our dream
To hunt in the hills and fish in its streams
Where we could locate a donation claim

"A big drove of cattle made another scene,
 And these were the facts that there I did gleam.
 A mile above camp they had started the band
 To the other bank, where it was easy to land.
 But the drove drifted down and failed to get out
 Up over the bank and went swimming about.
 Soon they were swimming around and around
 And washed down till nearly all were drowned.
 And they went past us as they floated away
 And a fortune was lost in a single day.

"But now near Fort Boise, my tale I'll resume
 And the Indians first on the horizon loom.
 They mostly in breech clouts alone were dressed
 And to us this costume seemed very grotesque.
 They were catching salmon and peddling them out
 'Mongst the emigrants they were trading about.

"Swap Salmon, swap Salmon" was all they could say
 And they would take anything offered as pay.
 Of coats or old hats, old boots or old shirts
 And the squaws would take any old shawls or skirts.
 Just any old thing would pay for a fish
 That we could eat with a good relish.
 Well after the trade, it was funny to see
 Them strutting about as pleased as could be.
 If a man only got an old plug hat
 He was well dressed with nothing but that.
 If a squaw got a skirt, the worse for the wear,
 She had a great plenty, and some to spare.
 If a man got a shirt, he wanted no more
 And they had no time to think of the poor.

"But while waiting there a man had come in
 From the Willamette Valley, to meet his kin.
 And there he found his own family.
 Well, he proposed to those who would agree
 To follow him, he would pilot them through
 On a direct route and one that was new.
 To strike the Willamette near to its head
 And thence down to where the big valley spread.
 And he said the settlers over there
 Would meet us and help the road to clear.
 So we said with many our chance we'd take
 And follow this guide and the old road forsake
 So up the Malheur we traveled again
 A big company with our little train.

"I will tell of an accident sure
 To a wagon of people in fording Malheur

The banks I will say were not rugged or steep
The river was shallow, scarce two feet deep.
And bottom was good, excepting a rock
Which lay in the midst---a big cubic block
The wagons went near it, but just below
There was plenty of space in which to go.

"Two men and their wives, who owned the team
My aunt and her daughter wished to cross the stream.
So they all climbed in, four women, two men
Just to ride across and then walk again.
But the team kept up too near the stone
And the wheels ran on it and quick 'twas done.
The wagon upset and they were thrown
And fell in the water, every one.
A big pile of bedding was thrown out upon
Those women who down to the bottom had gone.
But soon they got up, though were wet as could be
And were not in a mood to laugh you may see.
Feather beds and pillows and blankets and quilts
Were dancing away from where they were spilt.

"Down the current the women right after them ran
And dragged them out till they got every one.
The men watched the teams and right the schooner
When all was ready, they started again
And fell back again with the moving train.

"After this happened for a week about
And up the small valley we kept our route.
And we saw a burial---a woman had died.
And they buried her there on the rocky hillside.
But this good lady was not of our train.
We halted till she in her grave was lain.
And then traveled on the same as before
And crossed a divide to a valley once more.
And here two lakes of good size we found
And tried on their south side to go around.
But the mountain came in too near to the lake
And back to the north side our course we take.
Malheur and Harney were the names they went by.
Their waters we found were strong alkali.

"As we went to the west a desert we neared
But to some fine springs our course we steered.
Two nights and a day by them we stayed
And a hard day's travel next we made.
We made a dry camp ere the sun went down
Because far and near no water was found.

Some horsemen came back, a days travel they said
 From their guides and trains they were on ahead.
 They told us they no water had found
 Although they had hunted the country around
 Except a small seep, Spoon Springs, they called it
 And the women and children got not a bit
 For the men fought them off, dipped it up with a spoon
 And swallowed it up, so the weak ones got none.

"Well, they scared our folks---after summer was done
 They hitched up their teams and made a night run.
 Back o'er the route regardless of cost.
 They traveled that night and much stock was lost.
 They slipped out of the band and away they went,
 For they smelled water, and followed the scent.

"Well, that night we traveled and the next morning at ten
 We were back at those springs and rested again
 While there we ate our last crumbs of bread
 And the future looked dark to us weary bipeds.
 Scarcely anything was left us now to eat
 Except the poor cattle and they were blue meat.
 No grease was found, no not a little
 Was seen on the water in the beef kettle.
 And we threw away everything we could spare
 To lighten the loads which our wagon did bear.
 So the poor weary teams could drag them along
 And everyone walked who could in that throng.

"About ten horsemen had left us for good
 To go to the valley as quick as they could
 And there get provisions their horses to load
 And come back and meet us along the road.

"And now an incident in the front train
 I will tell while we at the springs remain.
 The people suffering with hunger and thirst
 Brooded o'er their troubles till their anger burst.
 On the guide who had brought them into this place
 They resolved to hang him and their grievance efface,
 And then of three wagons they took the tongues
 And made the tripod on which he'd be hung.
 But his wife pleaded with them successfully
 And they put it off till some other day.
 Well, water was found and we all moved on
 Over the road where we twice had gone.

"The first a small creek high up on a mountain
 And it sank ere it ran a mile from its fountain.

At Oregon City, the nearest mill stands
To two hundred miles the round trip expands.
And now while some teams take our wheat to the mill
I will add a short sketch, this story to fill.

"Of these men who had left us back quite a way
Whom we had not heard from since parting that day
'Twas more than two weeks after we got in
Before they showed up, weak, hungry and thin.

"They had eaten their dogs and their horses too
They ate dead salmon, 'twas the best they could do.
They even ate snails to keep them alive
Until the settlements they did arrive.
In mountain and timber they had been lost.
Very nearly, I say, their lives it did cost.

"But they all got in, and the teams got back
With their loads of flour and we had no lack
So the cabins are built and the milling is done
And I will quit, for my yarn is spun."