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The Oregon Trail and Native Americans

The Oregon Trail saw countless parties traverse its often rugged, poorly established roads of travel, ford its often flooded rivers, and suffer through heavy rain spells, extreme heat, freak snowstorms, and many other toils, all for the promise of a new piece of land and a better life. All this coupled with countless other obstacles to make the Oregon Trail one of the most difficult excursions that mid-nineteenth century Americans could embark upon. A part of this brazenly dangerous journey was the presence of Native Americans at many junctures. Whether it was attempting to collect toll at a certain point on the route west, or if it was selling provisions like salmon to weary travelers, encounters with Native Americans proved to be both good and bad for travelers, with a pervasive racism underlying the entire relationship between these two parties.

Interestingly enough, at the outset of Agnes Stewart's journey from St. Joseph, Missouri, her diary provides a moment of clarity and understanding that, as we shall see, is atypical of the standard manner in which Native Americans were viewed by those who traveled on the Oregon Trail. Writing as she and her party were preparing to head out from St. Joseph on the long journey to Oregon, she, upon seeing some Native Americans, remarked that "The vast territory lies stretched before me, and nothing but wide forests can be seen as far as the eye can reach, and yet it seems small to the great continent once all their own. But now the government allows them part to themselves as a great favor, and taken by them as such, but

that does not make it right.”¹ Referring to the Indian Territory that the government reserved for Native Americans in what is now Oklahoma, Stewart poignantly points out the injustice of the colonization of America and the eventual movement westward of Americans, both of which saw land taken from Native Americans, lives lost on both sides, and the relegation of Native Americans to non-prominence in the land that was once entirely their own. It’s a rare moment of understanding and empathy that wasn’t voiced much by travelers heading out on the Oregon Trail. Furthermore, it demonstrates that despite a fairly racist attitude when dealing with Native Americans, travelers of the Oregon Trail were also capable of compassion towards those that once had all of America to themselves.

Attitudes towards Native Americans were not, however, always so sympathetic. Take, for example, the writing of Helen Stewart, sister to Agnes Stewart, both of whom were members of the “Lost Wagon Train” of 1853, which nearly turned into another Donner Party incident until nearby settlers came to their aid days before they would have ran out of supplies and eventually succumbed to the harsh conditions. About a month into their journey, the party was alerted to the possibility of a large group of Native Americans a short ways ahead of them, with these Native Americans likely looking to the fight. Remarking on this, Helen Stewart wrote that “it would be best to leave enough men with the wagons and the rest go and kill every Indian, man, woman, and child and even suckling babes, for if they could not fight now they would when they got older and big enough.”² While it’s certainly possible that Stewart’s reaction to hearing of Native Americans looking to fight is simply because fighting of any kind

¹ Agnes Stewart Diary, 10 April 1853, Coll 245. Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene.

² Helen Stewart Diary, 17 June 1853, Coll 245. Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene.

seemed detestable to her, and Stewart would much rather make her travels towards Oregon as safe and uneventful (in a good way) as possible, this doesn't seem to be the case. Rather, it seems that this kind of blatant racism when dealing with Native Americans is not atypical of travelers on the Oregon Trail, but rather the norm as evidenced by other writings from both Helen Stewart and others. Indeed, when looking towards the writing of Catherine Amanda Stansbury Washburn on her journey from Iowa to Oregon in 1853, again there is evidence that Native American warriors seemed to be a great fear to Oregon Trail travelers. After just a few short weeks on the trail, Washburn notes that she "met a man that advised us to wait for a large company he said that there was an Indian Village a mile ahead and fifteen hundred warriors and they said the white should not pass their Village."³ This writing gives particular insight into the reciprocal animosity between Native Americans and travelers on the Oregon Trail. Native Americans were particularly wary of Oregon Trail settlers because of the tense, exploitative relationship they held with Americans. These same Americans had slowly begun encroaching on their lands as they moved westward, and with many tribes already having their land taken in exchange for measly parcels of land in Indian territory, Native Americans were generally inherently distrustful of white Americans.

Examining the other side of the relationship, the animosity held towards Native Americans by white Americans was arguably more disdainful. Again turning to the writing of Helen Stewart, she notes, "We have moved to better grass, and near an Indian village. They are the filthiest creatures I ever saw. They will pick lice out of their heads and eat them. There

³ Catherine Amanda Stansbury Washburn Diary, 10 May 1853, SFM 222. Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene.

clothes are so dirty.”⁴ This speaks to the supposed inferiority that white Americans held towards not only Native Americans, but anyone of a different creed or race. In fact, just a month earlier, Helen Stewart remarked that “We do not see as many Indians as we did but we see plenty of Mexicans, which is a great deal worse. They are the most disgusting looking people I ever saw.”⁵ People of a different skin color were regarded with an extreme amount of condescension, with white Americans considering themselves superior in terms of both intellectual ability and also culture. In part due to Enlightenment thinking, the European/American culture was regarded as the apex of human civilization, with any other way of life, such as that of the many different Native American tribes in the United States, being behind the times, so to speak.

With a great deal of disrespect and cynicism from both Native Americans and travelers on the Oregon Trail, it’s easy to see how contentious interactions between Native Americans and travelers could be. Native Americans are not, however, without at least some degree of fault in the situation, due in large part to some of the more mischievous actions taken by them. Coming back to the writing of Catherine Amanda Stansbury Washburn, it can be seen that Native Americans could be a minor nuisance, or perhaps something more sinister. Washburn writes that, along the way, they “repaired a brush bridge and Crossed the creek the Indians came and tore it away as soon as we had crossed.”⁶ A common practice of Native Americans was, at bridges that allowed Oregon Trail travelers to cross rivers without fording them, Native

⁴ Helen Stewart Diary, 24 July 1853, Coll 245. Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene.

⁵ Helen Stewart Diary, 26 June 1853, Coll 245. Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene.

⁶ Catherine Amanda Stansbury Washburn Diary, 3 May 1853, SFM 222. Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene.

Americans would charge tolls of near two dollars. Travelers, obviously not wanting to pay these tolls on their journey west, would create brush bridges that allowed them to cross without having to pay this unfair toll, or simply not pay the toll at all. As Helen Stewart notes, “There is some of the streams, bridged and we pay toll, but there were some that would not do it, and the Indians followed them for two days, and we heard that there were some that had all their horses and cattle stolen.”⁷ While the word of mouth often leads to great exaggerations of the truth, it’s certainly fair to say that tolls charged by Native Americans could cause quite a bit of trouble for Oregon Trail travelers. It’s also worth noting that, as evidenced by the writing of Helen Stewart, refusing to pay a toll could have more damaging consequences on a traveling party than simply paying a toll. Livestock were used to both pull wagons, for food, and were part of the livelihood that these travelers packed up and moved with them. Without some of their cows or horses, some of which were lost as a result of hardships throughout the journey west, travelers were stretched further to their limits in trying to start their new lives.

Another instance of Native Americans acting contentious towards Oregon Trail travelers is their many escapades and attempts to steal horses, cattle, and other livestock from travelers. The journal of Catherina Amanda Stansbury Washburn recounts a particularly exhilarating episode of this. Nearing the finally of their journey, they “were roused by the Indians last night trying to steel our horses we had all gone to bed but two of the boys heard a noise among the horses...so they came back and got their guns and slipt on to them they saw two and fired at them...we then heard guns all round firing.”⁸ As previously noted, livestock were particularly

⁷ Helen Stewart Diary, 14 May 1853, Coll 245. Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene.

⁸ Catherine Amanda Stansbury Washburn Diary, 31 July 1853, SFM 222. Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene.

valuable to those traveling on the Oregon Trail, and as such they were quite protective of them. Nevertheless, Native Americans would often attempt to take the horses and cattle of weary travelers, though whether this was for sport, as a way to help their own livelihoods, or just a way to get back at all the injustices thrust upon them by white Americans is difficult to say. Furthering the troubling relationship between Native Americans and Oregon Trail travelers was the fact that travelers were often quick to blame Native Americans for missing livestock and other mishaps that could have potentially been caused by an outside party. Take, for example, the writing of Rachel Taylor, who traveled from Rockford, Illinois to Oregon in 1853. Near the beginning of her journey, she recounted that “Two of our horses are missing...Soon after three others started with their loaded guns not doubting that the Indians were at the bottom of the affair.”⁹ Moving with a great deal of alacrity, the men in her traveling party were eager to assign blame to the nearby Native Americans. It turns out, however, that the horses were merely scared by thunder overnight and ran some distance from the party as a result. Nevertheless, the speed with which the party assigned blame to nearby Native Americans demonstrates the bigotry of Oregon Trail travelers.

This bigotry did not even require the physical presence of Native Americans, yet when Native Americans did come into direct contact with those on the Oregon Trail, these travelers were often anxious and concerned. About halfway through her journey, Rachel Taylor had, despite having had no negative interactions with the Native Americans she had so far encountered, a deep distrust of Native Americans. She remarked that “There are plenty of

⁹ Rachel Taylor Diary, 31 May 1853, A 121. Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene.

Indians in this vicinity, and they are rather more friendly than we desire.”¹⁰ Stories of Native Americans stealing horses and cattle were passed through word of mouth along the Oregon Trail, and even those Native Americans that intended no harm and held no ill will towards the travelers were regarded in a negative manner. As the trip wore on, Taylor’s writing in regards to Native Americans took a more unscrupulous turn, with her diary showing that “Were visited by a lot of Digger Indians. They are a filthy theiving race and would not scruple to take a person’s life if it could be done without risking their own.”¹¹ Here again, even without provocation, Taylor, like the typical Oregon Trail traveler, felt a deep sense of disdain for Native Americans, with their mere presence proving quite bothersome. Whether it was based on word of mouth horror stories or caused by a deeply ingrained sense of superiority, the fact remains that Americans traveling west regarded Native Americans as inferior beings lacking in culture and civility.

In spite of all the animosity between the two parties, it bears mentioning that a great deal of encounters between Oregon Trail travelers and Native Americans were cordial, civil, and productive. Returning to Helen Stewarts encounter with over 500 supposedly hostile Native Americans, she goes on to write that “The great army that frightened him so proved to be very friendly. One came first and shook hands with us...I saw some of the prettiest girls and they were dressed so nice after their own fashion.”¹² All that fear that travelers held in their relationship with Native Americans often turned out, as is the case here, to be completely

¹⁰ Rachel Taylor Diary, 29 July 1853, A 121. Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene.

¹¹ Rachel Taylor Diary, 7 September 1853, A 121. Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene.

¹² Helen Stewart Diary, 17 June 1853, Coll 245. Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene.

unfounded. And indeed, Oregon Trail travelers also received much help in their journey from Native Americans. Rachel Taylor visited several Indian wigwams, a type of domed enclosure used by some Native Americans for housing, noting that “We visited some more Indian wigwams, where there were some squaws. They showed us some of their ornamental work, and seemed very friendly.”¹³ Often times the Native Americans encountered on the Oregon Trail were quite friendly, and they even sold provisions on occasion. Towards the end of her journey, Catherina Amanda Stansbury Washburn remarked that there were two separate instances in which “the Indians came and sold us some dried Salmon.”¹⁴ Towards the end of the trail, many trading posts had an established Native American presence, with these Native Americans selling provisions and supplies to weary travelers looking for a boost on their journey. Those Native Americans that sold things like salmon and ornamental pieces were regarded by travelers as both cordial and friendly. Together, these instances of good will between the two parties constituted a greater part of the relationship shared by Native Americans and Oregon Trail travelers, greater than either party is likely to admit. It’s also interesting that, despite Native Americans demonstrating the qualities that white travelers felt they lacked, the bigotry these travelers had towards Native Americans never wavered. Perhaps this unabashed racist chauvinism was too deeply ingrained, but nevertheless it causes the mind to wonder how Oregon Trail travelers so blindly held onto their beliefs, when they had experiences that completely contradicted them.

¹³ Rachel Taylor Diary, 7 July 1853, A 121. Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene.

¹⁴ Catherine Amanda Stansbury Washburn Diary, 4 August 1853, SFM 222. Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene.

No doubt a treacherous journey, the Oregon Trail proved to be one of the most exhilarating, colorful, and lively trips that those traversing its rugged roads would face. They would encounter many dangers and obstacles, with Native Americans sometimes proving to be a threat, and other times being a friend in tough times. Overall, a pervasive racism underlined the relationship between these two parties, leading to interesting experience, both good and bad, for both sides.

Trevor,

This is an outstanding paper. Could I use it as an example for future students?

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