



The Oregon Trail. Line of Original Emigration to the Pacific Northwest Commonly Known as the "Old Oregon Trail" from *The Ox Team or the Old Oregon Trail 1852-1906* by Ezra Meeker. Fourth Edition 1907.

Excerpt from <http://donnagene53.tripod.com/oregondiary1852/>, with appreciation.

Introduction: I am very pleased to pass this on. It describes how settlers made their way here to the Sublimity, Oregon area by covered wagon train in 1852, making a nice comparison with later travel by emigrant railway (presented elsewhere on this website in a *Letter from Oregon Settlers to their Home in Iowa, Sublimity 1872*).

The *diary* was written by Mary Jane Smith Watkins, b. 1835, who emigrated with her parents from Indiana to Oregon. Enroute she married but her new husband died before reaching Oregon, as did both her parents. The *added comments* were apparently written by her daughter Sarah Maria Watkins Riches-Adamson, b. 1856.

Henry Strobel

## An Oregon Trail Diary, 1852

We cast our lots and sought our fortunes in the far West. It meant leaving our homes, our loved ones, our parents, and our friends to endure the hardships of a long and tedious journey.... to brave the dangers of camp life in the mountain wilds, added to the terrors and fears of molestations by the Indians. Our reason for coming to Oregon . . . to get free land in the heavenly country where sickness was hardly ever known.

[In 1850 Congress passed a law which is known as the Donation Land Claim Bill. It gave a man and wife 640 acres, and 320 to single men or unmarried women.]

In 1852 the train was mostly from Decatur and Rush Counties, Indiana with considerable members from Ohio and Illinois. There were nearly 100 families of the oldest and best known of the counties and all were well fixed financially. The Sunday previous to our departure on March 5, 1852 we were prayed for in all the pulpits.

From Madison we chartered a new boat, the *Kate Sweeney*, to take us on our journey as far as St. Joseph, Missouri.

On March 14, 1852 at midnight we started loading our wagons and by daylight all were on board.

March 15th: We slipped cable and at 4 o'clock [p.m.] we were lying at the Louisville Wharf. The next day we passed over the Falls of the Ohio.

On March 16th: We touched at Shawnytown, Kentucky [Shawneetown, Illinois]. Some of the passengers got off the boat and nearly missed getting back on board. We passed the mouth of the Ohio about 9 o'clock [p.m.] Had a bad storm and could not land and so had to ride the storm out.

March 18th: We arrived in St. Louis about 10 in the morning, wind very strong and the dust flying. After dark we put out again and passed the mouth of the Missouri River during the night. There seemed something almost mysterious in the scene when we steamed into the yellow flood of the Missouri.

March 20th: We had service today with Mr. Worth preaching.

March 21st: Monday made Boonville. Today, had visitors, pretty girls.

March 23rd: We came across the "Alton" lying on a sand bar high and dry, we took some of her passengers in our cabin, was very crowded and uncomfortable. We also had some Indians aboard.

March [no date] We ran aground on a sand bar. The Limour coming up towed us off having been aground 12 hours.

March 26th: This morning during a high wind we ran against a bank and into a tree top tearing off a part of the guard and tore a large hole in the ladies cabin. In the evening we passed the mouth of the Kansas and caught the first glimpse of the Indian Territory.

March 27th: At 3 o'clock this evening we arrived at St. Joseph where we stayed one month buying teams, supplies, clothing and equipment for our trip. We held a meeting and agreed to start again on April 28.

April 28th: We completed our purchases, finished loading up, hitched in about 12 noon and started on our journey overland. We drove 12 miles and camped in a beautiful grove with lots of grass. We tied all the oxen and horses to the trees.

April 29th: We found some of our cattle had wandered away so had to form groups to look for them, but did not find them.

April 30th: Searched again for lost stock without finding them.

May 1: Rode 15 miles alternating between groves of beautiful timber and prairie. We came across curious mounds, some were 200 feet high. Had a bad thunder and lightning storm.

May 2nd: Went 5 miles. Hot and dry and dusty. The wind upset some of our tents. We traveled through Iowa for 100 miles.

May 8th: A lot of wagons bogged down at a bad slough. We overtook Mr. Hunt and Watkins Teams which had traveled faster than the main train. Here we dug a well to get drinking water.

May 10th: Our turn came to ferry over the river so we hitched up and raced to the river just in time to save our turn. There were 27 wagons together now.

May 9th & 10th: We crossed the Missouri River on a rope ferry where Omaha now stands. Nothing to see but Indian and Buffalo trails going down to water. Very quiet here, only sounds of the birds chattering and the wings of the locust or the wave made by the wind on the tall grass. Very depressing. The emigrants mostly were in stout wagons, there were a few horses but mostly all had oxen. On both sides of the Platte river a continuous stream of prairie schooners could be seen. We saw many Indians riding along on ponies with lowered heads. We forded the Platte River [at a place where Platte City now stands.] Each wagon cooked and ate by themselves. Stock was put in a corral made by a circle of wagons if the spot seemed unsafe, otherwise they were allowed to feed close by during the night. We encountered thunder storms with lightning. The streams raised during the hard storms and often ran through our tents. We also met with high wind storms which flattened our tents like mushrooms. Many of the immigrants were frightened out of their wits by the Indians. No plow had ever turned a furrow on the black loam. Our wagons were packed with boxes, bundles, bedding, tin cans and, in short, all the equipment of a camper who, as it were, took his life in his hands and had gone into an unknown land for a length of time where he will be cut off from communications without any base of supplies.

[Note by Mary Elkins:----May 16, 17, 18, 19, & 20 nothing much happened except that they passed thru two Indian villages which they plundered for the wood they contained. They also saw an Indian Chief's grave surrounded by 32 horse skulls forming a circle 12 feet wide.]

May 20th: We met a group of 300 to 400 Indians going to St. Joe with heavily loaded horses. Shortly afterward we met a party of 60 soldiers coming to punish the same group of Indians for some offence they committed.

May 23rd: Today we had our first death, that of a small child from whooping cough. Bad Camp. Poor grass and no wood.

May 23rd: Today a division of opinion arose, some wanted to stay here, others to go on to a better place to camp so 6 wagons left including Hunt, Watkins, Craig, and Stroup who get out by themselves.

June 26th: This morning we overtook Mr. Hunt. He was by himself having been left by his company near Laramie. One of his children, Mr. Craig's wife, Mr. Watkins and a young man named Jones and a young man named Garrett had all died of Cholera. Garrett seems to have been traveling west with the Hunts.

**Sarah Riches-Adamson, daughter of Mary Jane Watkins, added these comments:**

“William Watkins and Sarah Smith, his wife, were of English and Dutch ancestry, they lived in Wayne Co., IN and were storekeepers. In 1852 they started across the plains to Oregon.

“Soon after starting William became ill with the cholera, died and is buried beside the trail of the Platte River.

“When the train reached the Sweet Water country, Sarah, the mother, became ill with the same disease, Cholera. When it appeared that she must follow her husband, she called her young pretty blue eyes daughter, Mary Jane, only 17 years old and a young man named Calvin Walker [who had fallen in love with the girl] to the bedside and urged them to marry so that the young girl and her four little brothers would have a protector the rest of the way into the Oregon. [A "successful" wagon train would reach Independence Rock by July 4<sup>th</sup>.]

“At Independence Rock on July 4, 1852 the wedding of Mary Watkins and Calvin Walker took place with Rev. Begley, a Campbellite preacher, officiating.

“When the Cascades were reached Calvin Walker became sick with mountain fever and had to be left behind with their belongings. Mary stayed with him.

“Mr. Stroup, one of the men in the wagon train, volunteered to take the four younger brothers on and deliver them to their uncle Mr. James Hunt of Sublimity in Marion County, Oregon where they waited for their sister Mary. Sometime later Mr. Givens, who had also been compelled to leave some of his equipment on the trail, returned and found Mary and Calvin.

“Mary and Calvin asked Mr. Givens to take them on to Foster's place on the west side of Mt. Hood on the Barlow Route. Mary took only what she needed, carrying it in a sack. The wagons and all equipment were left behind after being well marked as belonging to Calvin Walker.

“At Foster's place there were a number of sick immigrants with beds made up on the floor of a school house which was being built and here Calvin died. He is buried there on the slopes of Mt. Hood. Mary became quite ill by this time with the fever and hardly knew when her husband died. She had quite a large sum of money in her purse, which her mother had given her when she became ill, but when Mary recovered she had only \$5.00. The rest had been stolen.

“Nathan and Jonathan Hunt, her cousins, went from Sublimity to Foster's place for her in Sept. of the year she reached her Uncle's place.

“Soon after arriving there she met a young widower, George P. S. Riches and on Dec 22nd of that year [1852?] married and moved at once to his land claim a few miles south of Silverton in the Waldo Hills. A short time after George went back to where all of Mary's things had been left but found they had all been burned, possibly by campers.”

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I found these photos of George P. S. Riches and Mary Jane Watkins Riches at [richesclan.org/](http://richesclan.org/). Thanks.

George Palgrave Smith Taylor Riches was born in 1821 in England. He came to Oregon by the Oregon Trail and settled about 1847 in the Waldo Hills area just north of Sublimity. Died 1891. I have often driven past Riches Road, unaware of the likely connection.

His wife, 1835-1904, is of course the author of this Oregon Trail Diary. Her first husband was Calvin Walker who soon died on the Trail of “mountain fever.”

They are both buried in Mt. Hope cemetery (aka Hunt family cemetery) in the Waldo Hills. You will find copious notes in the records at the Mt. Hope cemetery web site. Henry Strobel

