

Brown, Tabitha Moffat 1780-1858  
Pacific File A BRIMFIELD HEROINE

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How a prucky woman from Hampden County, Massachusetts, Made her way to Oregon and started the Pacific University. A Vivid account of traveling through a wilderness.

The following letter has recently come to light, showing what hardships a company of emigrants from Missouri to Oregon endured in 1846.

It was written by Mrs. Tabitha Brown, the widow of Rev. Clark Brown who preached in Brimfield from 1797 to 1803.

Mrs. Brown was a daughter of Dr. Joseph Moffat, a physician in Brimfield his native place, some forty years. Mrs. Brown was born in 1780 and was therefore sixty six years old when she made the journey that she describes.

This letter was written in 1854 in her 75th year. For sometime after becoming a widow she was a teacher in Maryland and Virginia.

Afterwards in order to improve her situation and to help her boys she removed to Missouri where she lived a good many years. Within this period the other members of her father's family became widely scattered and their location unknown to her. In 1846 she ~~was~~ started for Oregon with her son and daughter and their families, with a Captain John Brown, brother of her deceased husband, accompanying them. She was eight months on the way and the amount of suffering she passed through and the courage with which she met it will be seen in the letter itself.

Forest Grove, West Tualatin Plains,  
Washington County, Oregon Territory, August, 1854.

My Brother and Sister:-  
It is impossible for me to express to you the unspeakable pleasure and happiness your letter of the 29th. of June gave me. Not



hearing from you for so great a length of time, I had concluded myself to be the last one of my father's family remaining here a pilgrim in the wide world to complete the work that God intended for me to do. Oh, that I could be present with you and Margaret and relate in the hearing of your children the numerous vicissitudes and dangers I have encountered by land and by sea, since I parted with you and Margaret in Brimfield. It would fill a volume of many pages. But I will give you a few items from the time I left Missouri in April 1846 for Oregon.

I expected all three of my children to accompany me but Mathanos was detained by sickness and his wife was unwilling to leave her parents.

I provided for myself a good ox wagon team, a good supply of what was requisite for myself, Capt. Brown and my driver. Uncle John insisted on coming and crossed the plains on horseback.

Orus Brown with his wife and eight children fitted out their several families and joined a train of forty or more for Oregon, in high expectation of gaining the wished for land of promise. The novelty of our journey with few exceptions was pleasing and prosperous until after we passed fort Hall. Then we were within eight hundred miles of Oregon city, if we had kept on the old road down the Columbia River. But three or four trains of emigrants were decoyed off by a rascally fellow that came out from the settlement in Oregon assuring us that he had found a new cut-off, that if we would follow him we would be in the settlement long before those that had gone down the Columbia. This was in August.

The idea of shortening a long journey caused us to yield to his advice. Our sufferings from that time no tongue can tell. He left a pilot with us who proved to be an excellent man, otherwise we never would have seen Oregon. He said he would clear the road before us so that we should have no trouble in rolling our wagons after him. He robbed us of what he could by lying, and left us to the depredations of Indians, wild beasts



and starvation. But God was with us. We had sixty miles of desert without grass or water, mountains to climb, cattle giving out, wagons breaking, emigrants sick and dying, hostile indians to guard against by night and day, to keep from being killed or having our horses or cattle arrowed or stolen. We were carried hundreds of miles south of Oregon into Utah Territory and California. Fell in with the Klamath and Rogue-River Indians, lost nearly all our cattle and passed the Umpqua Mountains, twelve miles through. I rode through ~~through~~ in three days at the risk of my life, on horseback, having lost my wagon and all that I had but the horse I was on.

Our families were the first that started into the Canyon, so we got through the mud and rocks much better than those that came in afterwards. Out of hundreds of wagons only one came through without breaking. The Canyon was strewn with dead cattle, broken wagons, beds, clothing and everything but provisions of which latter we were nearly all destitute. Some people were in the Canyon two or three weeks before they could get through. Some died without warning from fatigue and starvation. Others ate the flesh of the cattle that were lying dead by the wayside. After struggling through mud, rocks and water up to our horses' sides much of the way in crossing this twelve mile mountain, we opened into the <sup>beautiful Umpqua</sup> valley, inhabited only by indians and wild beasts.

We still had another mountain to cross, the Calipooia, besides many miles to travel through mud, snow, hail and rain. Winter had set in. We were yet a long distance from any white settlement. The word was "fly every one that can from starvation," save those that are compelled to stay by the cattle, to recruit them for further traveling. They divided the last bit of bacon of which I had seen three slices; I had also a cup full of tea. This was the last division of all we had. No bread. We saddled our horses and set off not knowing that we should ever see



each other again. Capt. Brown was too old and feeble to render any assistance or protection to me. I was obliged to ride ahead as a pilot, hoping to overtake four or five wagons that left camp the day before.

Near sunset we came up with the families that had left the camp that morning. They had nothing to eat and their cattle had given out. We all camped in an oak grove together, for the night. In the morning I divided my last morsel with them and left them to take care of themselves.

I hurried Capt. Brown to ride fast, so as to overtake the three wagons ahead. We passed beautiful mountains and valleys; saw but two indians at a distance during the day. In the after-part of the day Capt. Brown complained of sickness, and could only walk his horse at a distance behind me. He had a swimming in his head and a pain in his stomach.

In two or three hours he became delirious and fell from his horse. I was afraid to jump down from my horse to assist him as it was one a woman had never ridden before. He tried to rise up on his feet but could not. I rode close to him and set the end of his cane that I had in my hand hard into the ground by him, to pull up by. I urged him to walk a little. He tottered along a few yards and gave out. I then saw a little sunken spot a few steps from me. I led his horse into that and with much difficulty got him raised on his horse. I then requested him to hold fast to the saddle and horse's mane and I would lead by the bridle. Two miles ahead was another mountain to climb over. As I reached the foot of it he was able to take the bridle in his own hands and we passed over safely into a large valley, a wide, extensive solitary place, and no wagons in sight. The sun was now setting, the wind was blowing and the rain was drifting upon the side of the distant mountain. Poor me!

I crossed the plains to where these mountain spurs met, ravines meandering betwixt the points. Here the shades of night were gathering fast and I could see the wagon tracks no further. I alighted from my horse,



flung off my saddle and saddle bag and tied the horse fast with a lasso rope to a tree. The Capt. asked me what I was going to do? My answer was " I am going to camp for the night." He gave a groan and fell to the ground. I gathered my wagon sheet that I had put under my saddle, flung it over a projecting limb of a tree and made me a fine tent. I then stripped the Captain's horse and tied him, placed saddles, blankets, bridles and so forth under the tent then helped up the bewildered old gentleman, and introduced him to his new lodging upon the naked ground.

His senses were gone. I covered him as well as I could with the blankets and seated myself on my feet behind him expecting he would be a corpse before morning. Pause a moment, and consider my situation. Worse than alone in a savage wilderness, without food, without fire, cold and shivering, wolves fighting and howling all around me. The darkness of night forbade the stars to shine upon me; all was solitary as death. ~~W~~

But that same kind Providence that has ever been, was watching over me still. I committed my all to Him and felt no fear. As soon as light had dawned, I pulled down my tent, saddled my horses, found the Captain so as to stand on his feet. Just at this moment one of the emigrants I was trying to overtake came to me. He was in search of venison. Half a <sup>mile</sup> ahead were the wagons I was trying to overtake, and we were soon there, and ate plentifully of fresh venison. Within eight feet of where my tent was set, fresh tracks of two indians were plainly visible, but I did not know they were there. They killed and robbed a Mr. Newton, only a short distance off, but would not kill his wife because she was a woman. The indians killed another man on our cut-off. The rest of the emigrants escaped with their lives. We then traveled on and in a few days came to the foot of the Calipooia mountain. Here we were obliged to wait for more emigrants to help cut a road through. Here my children and grand-children came up with us, a joyful meeting. They had been near



starving. Mr. Pringle tried to shoot a wolf but he was too weak and trembling to hold his rifle steady. They all cried because they had nothing to eat. Just at this time their son came to them with a supply and they all cried again.

Winter had set in. We were many days in crossing the Calipooia mountain and able to go ahead only a mile or two each day. The road had to be cut and opened for us and the mountain was covered with snow..

With much difficulty we crossed over to the head-waters of the Willamette followed the river down a few days and gave up the idea of reaching the settlement until spring. Provisions gave out and Mr. Pringle set off on horseback for the settlement for relief. , not knowing how long he would be gone or whether he would get through at all. In a week or two our scanty provisions were gone. We were again in a state of starvation.

Much crying, many tears were shed through the day by all but one. She had passed through many trials sufficient to convince her that tears could avail nothing in our extremity. Through all my sufferings in crossing the plains, I not once sought relief by the shedding of tears, nor thought we should not live to reach the settlements. The same faith and hope that I ever had in the blessings of kind Providence, strengthened in proportion to the trials I had to encounter. As the only alternative or last resort for the present time, Mr. Pringle's eldest son Clark shot down one of his father's best working oxen and dressed it.

It had not one particle of fat about it. We then had something to eat, poor bones to pick without bread or salt.

I must now digress a little. In the year 1843 Orus Brown came to Oregon to look at the country. In 1845 he returned. When within four or five hundred miles of the U. S. Frontier, he and the three men with him were taken by the Pawnee Indians and robbed. They got away from them, however, and subsisted on berries and rose-buds until they reached



the frontier settlements. Very likely you saw the publication about Dr. White & O. Brown, Chapman and one other being taken by the Pawnees in 1845. In 1846 when we all started for Oregon, Orus Brown was appointed pilot, having crossed the plains twice before. His company was six days ahead of us, so he had gone down the old emigrant road, and reached the settlement in September. In six or eight weeks after, he ~~had~~ heard of the suffering emigrants at the south, he set off in haste with four pack horses and provisions for our relief. He met Mr. Pringle, turned him about, and in a few days they were at our camp. We had all retired to rest in our tents, hoping to forget our troubles until daylight should remind us ~~of them~~ again of our sad fate. In the gloomy stillness of the night footsteps of horses were heard rushing towards our tents. Directly a halloo! It was the well known voices of Orus Brown and V. Pringle. Who can realize the joy? Orus by his persuasive perseverance encouraged us to more effort to reach the settlements.

Five miles from where we camped, we fell in with a company of half-breed French and Indians, with pack-horses. We hired six of them and pushed ahead again. Our provisions were becoming short. We were once more on allowance, until we reached the first settlers. There our hardest struggles were ended. On Christmas day at 2 P. M. I entered the house of a Methodist Minister, the first house I had set my foot in for nine months. He requested me to take the whole charge of his house and family through the winter. ~~Yes Yes~~ His wife was ignoerent and use-  
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 less as a heathen Goddess. My services compensated for my own board and Captain Brown's through the winter. For two or three weeks of my journey down the Willamette I had felt something in the the end of my glove finger, which I supposed to be a button. On examination at my new home, I found it to be a 6 1/4 cent piece. This was the whole of my capital in cash to commence business with in Oregon. With it I purchas



three needles. I traded off some of my old clothes to the squaws for buckskins, worked them into gloves for the Oregon ladies and gentlemen, which cleared me upwards of thirty dollars, extra of boarding. In May 1847 I left Salem which is now our seat of Government, for Oregon City thirty miles down the Willamette. I went in an open boat in company with my Methodist Minister and family. From thence down the Columbia river to the Pacific Ocean. Here I spent the summer at a settlement ~~by~~ south of the bay. At this place there were but ten families residing ~~at~~ then. I boarded with a Mr. Gray and Lady Missionaries ~~and Lady Missionaries~~ from Ballston N. Y. a very genteel family. Spent the summer in visiting and bathing in the ocean. In October I started in an open boat up the river for Salem again, wind and tide against us. Were thirteen days in reaching Oregon City. Here I was withing twenty miles of Tualatin Plains, Orus Brown's location. It would not do for a mother to pass by. I luckily found a man with an empty wagon going out, that lived neighbor to Orus. I gave him two dollars for my passage, calculated to spend two weeks only with Orus and family and reach salem before winter set in. Went to a Presbyterian meeting on Sunday. After meeting Orus gave me an introduction to Mr. and Mrs. Clark, missionaries from from New York who came here in 1840. They <sup>invited</sup> ~~pressed~~ me home with them to spend a few days. Winter set in. They pressed me hard to spend the winter with them. I ~~accepted~~ their invitation. Our intimacy ever since has been more like mother and children than that of strangers. They are about the same age as my own children and look to me for counsel and advice equally as much. In October 1847 came news from the suffering emigrants; much sickness and death on the plains. I said to Mr. Clark "why has Providence frowned on me and left me poor in this world? Had He blessed me with riches as he has many others, I know right well what I would do" "what would you do?" was the question. "I would establish myself in a comfortable house and receive all <sup>from</sup> ~~the~~ chil-



dren and be a mother to them." He fixed his keen eyes upon me to see if I was candid in what I said. "Yes I am". "If so, I will try with you and see what efforts we can make." Mr. Clark would take an agency and try to get assistance and establish a school in the plain. I should go into the old log meetings/house and receive all the children rich and poor.

Those parents that were able were to pay a dollar a week for board, for tuition, washing and all. I agreed to labor one year for nothing. Mr. Clark and others were to assist as far as they were able in furnishing provisions, provided there was not a sufficiency of cash coming in to sustain the poor. The time fixed was march 1848. The last saturday night in April after visiting my children in salem, I arrived at the plains again. Found everything prepared for me to go into the meeting house and cluck up my chickens the next morning. The neighbors had collected what broken knives and forks, tin pans and dishes they could part with for the Oregon Pioneer to commence house keeping with. A well educated lady from the East, a missionary's wife for a teacher. My family increased rapidly and in the summer they put me up a boarding house.

I now have thirty boarders of both sexes and all ages from four years old to thirty. I manage them and ~~with~~<sup>do</sup> all my work except washing, that part was done by the scholars. In the spring of '49 we called for trustees, had eight appointed. They voted me the whole charge of the boarding house free of rent. I was to provide for myself. Established the price of board at two dollars per week. Whatever I made over and above my expenses was my own. In '51 I had forty in my family, at \$2.50 per-week. I mixed with my own hands 3425 pounds of flour in less than five months. Mr. Clark for the establishment of the school gave over to the Trustees, a quarter section of land for a town plot, A large and handsome building is upon the spot of ground that we selected <sup>at the</sup> first start.

It has been under town corporation for two years and at the last session of the Legislature a charter was granted for a University to



with a limitation of \$50,000. The President and Professors are already here from Vermont. The teacher and his lady in the Academy are from N. Y.

You must excuse my troubling you with such a lengthy narrative. I have endeavored to give general outlines of what I have done. You must be your own judges of whether I have been doing good or evil. I have labored hard for myself and the public and the rising generation, but now I have quit hard work and live at my ease. I am independent as to worldly matters.

I own a nicely furnished white frame house on a lot in town within a short distance from the public buildings, that I rent for \$ 100. a year.

~~I have eight other town lots without buildings worth \$ 150. each.~~ I have eight cows and a number of young cattle. The cows I let out for their milk and one half of their increase. I have rising \$ 1,000. due me \$ 400. of it I have donated to the university besides \$ \$ 100. I gave to the Academy three years ago. Thus much I have accumulated by my own industry and management independent of my children, since I drew six and a fourth cents from my glove finger.

Now I must give you a short description of the beautiful scenery of this delightful and healthy country. The whole of Oregon is delightful especially the plains of which there are many. But this West Tualatin is the most beautiful of all. The outskirts of the plain are circled around with hills a few miles distant, covered to their summits with fine bunch grass, fir and other timber. Near to the edge, the plain is circled round with beautiful fir trees, green all the year, standing 300 feet high. In front of them in contrast with the green there are large spreading oaks casting their shades over the farmers' white houses as there are many in full view. Grass is green here all the year round and cattle get their living without being fed. Snow seldom lies on the ground longer than a few days. Large improvements extend out into the plains in every direction. You may see at all times large bands of cattle, horses and people passing in every direction morning and



evening. We have a cool refreshing breeze from the sea, the nights are cool and pleasant. We sleep under almost as much clothing in summer as in winter. I wish you could see this this beautiful and healthful country. We have no prevalent diseases. Most of the deaths that occur here are of emigrants whose systems were diseased before leaving the states. It is very seldom that we hear of a child dying that was born in Oregon. I have not time or space to give you prices current. Everything in the farming line has been very high and merchandise very low. Horses were valued last spring at from \$200 to \$300. American cows were valued at \$800 for my eight cows, now I could not get more than \$60 per head. Adieu for the present.

Tabitha Brown.