

The Ride to Save Oregon

by Louis Wolfe

Missionary Marcus Whitman knew the dangers that lay before him, but to him other things mattered much more. Back in Boston, the Board of Missions had voted to close down Wailaptu, the mission he had built so

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lovingly. Worse yet, the government in Washington seemed to be losing interest in the Oregon Territory. There was real danger that the British might seize those thousands of square miles of rich soil, forests, and fishing grounds. To save his mission, to save Oregon Territory, Marcus Whitman had decided to make the journey east at once.

A biting wind swept across the mission grounds as Whitman, a friend, and their guide rode off. Leading three pack mules and followed by Whitman's collie, the three men headed into the Rocky Mountain wilderness.

They maintained a steady pace as the trail became steeper and narrower and the air colder. After eleven days and four hundred miles of hard travel, the party reached an English fur-trading post in what is now Idaho. The captain in command tried to persuade Whitman to turn back. "The Indians will make trouble," he said, "and the trails are buried in snow. Soon—"

"There is nothing," Whitman cut in, "that can make me turn back." And he loaded up his pack mules and led his party south.

He found one of the worst winters in history gripping the Rockies. The temperature plummeted to thirty degrees below zero, and snow blanketed the mountains until only the treetops could be seen. Whitman and his companions were forced to use clubs to beat out a path for the horses and mules. The dog's paws froze, making it necessary to carry it on horseback. As the animals staggered ahead, their breath froze and icicles dangled from their mouths. Whitman's beard was a solid mass of ice that grew longer with every breath.

In this manner the party traveled for weeks, forging ahead foot by foot and wondering if they would ever get out of the mountains alive. But Whitman kept them moving, and in the early part of November they reached a trading post in what is now Utah. There, although warned again to wait until spring, Whitman purchased fresh supplies and set off early the next morning.

All went well until they reached the banks of the Colorado River. It was about six hundred yards wide, with a frozen rim of ice on either side. Down the middle raged a seething, boiling, foaming current.

For a few seconds Whitman said nothing; then he declared firmly, "It must be crossed, and it will be crossed."

As his companions gaped in amazement, Whitman wheeled his horse and rode to the river's edge. The animal put its head down, braced its forelegs, and tried desperately to back up, but Whitman forced it on, crashing through the ice. At once both rider and mount were swallowed up in the spray and foam. Long seconds later they popped to the surface near the center of the river. Branches and floating logs slammed against the terrified horse, but it struggled valiantly and finally reached the opposite shore.

Whitman was almost senseless from the cold. He slid from the saddle, chopped some wood, and made a fire to keep himself and his shivering horse from freezing to death.

Now that Whitman and his horse had chopped through the ice, it was not too difficult to get the other animals across. The dog, riding on horseback, seemed almost to enjoy the crossing.

After drying themselves out, the men pushed on. For days and weeks it was the same nightmare—howling winds, blizzards, and temperatures plunging to forty degrees below zero. Time and again they were forced to return to their former camp and wait until the unending storm eased up.

One especially bad day their guide realized with horror that he had lost the trail. The snow was so thick and the cold so unbearable that they seemed certainly doomed. Even the animals, standing motionless like weird white statues, seemed to sense the danger. Finally, however, one mule pricked up its ears, lifted its head, and plunged through the mountainous drifts. The three men decided to follow it blindly. They continued silently for hours, until suddenly the mule stopped. It had led them directly back to their camp of the night before!

Several days later, a terrific storm blew up, forcing them to seek shelter in a canyon for more than a week. This delay exhausted their food supplies and created a new terror—starvation.

For days they plodded over the mountains on almost empty stomachs. The animals were driven to eating each other's tails, and

the men lived on pieces of rawhide, becoming so weak they could barely stay in the saddle. Finally they had to kill and eat one of the pack mules to stay alive.

Marcus Whitman finally arrived in the nation's capital five months after he had left Waiilaptu Mission. His face was haggard and battered from the dreadful suffering he had endured. His hair was whiter, his robust frame weary, but his fighting spirit burned as brightly as ever.

In Washington he spoke to everyone who would listen—to senators, to cabinet members, and to President John Tyler himself. He told them of the fertile soil of Oregon, of the healthful climate and the innumerable resources—and at last his heroic efforts brought success. The Board of Missions granted him the right to keep Waiilaptu open, and in Washington he won strong backing for more emigration to Oregon.

Today much of the tremendous territory west of the Rockies and north of the Columbia River is American soil. And much of the credit for this is due to Marcus Whitman, whose 3000-mile ride was one of the great feats of courage and endurance in American history.

CHECK YOUR READING

1. **Marcus Whitman was going east to**
 - A save his mission from being closed
 - B keep the British from seizing Oregon
 - C Both A and B

2. **Whitman's expedition included**
 - A four men
 - B three mules
 - C Both A and B

3. **The captain at the Idaho fur-trading post tried to**
 - A persuade Whitman to turn back
 - B direct Whitman to the wrong trail
 - C sell Whitman inferior supplies

4. **The dog had to be carried on horseback because its**
 - A leg was broken
 - B paws were frozen
 - C foot was cut

5. **The Colorado River was**
 - A extremely rough
 - B partly frozen
 - C Both A and B

6. **The first thing Whitman did after crossing the river was**
 - A build a fire
 - B call the dog
 - C change his clothes

7. **When the guide lost the trail, the party was saved by**
 - A a mule
 - B the dog
 - C Neither A nor B

8. **When food became desperately short, the men ate**
 - A pieces of rawhide
 - B one of the mules
 - C Both A and B

9. **In Washington, Whitman publicized his cause by**
 - A talking to important men
 - B publishing a successful book
 - C writing letters to friends

10. **Whitman's efforts resulted in**
 - A success
 - B disappointment
 - C disaster