

FROM THE PLAINS TO THE PLATEAU: INDIAN AND EMIGRANT
INTERACTIONS DURING THE OVERLAND
TRAIL MIGRATIONS

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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American emigrants frequently encountered Native North Americans during the overland trail migrations of the 1840s-1860s. This study examines the frequency and nature of those interactions in two geographic sections: the first half of the trail, from the Missouri River to the eastern slope of the South Pass of the Rocky Mountains, and the second half, from the western slope of South Pass to Oregon City, Oregon. While the predominant historiography of these migrations has focused on a binary of hostile or non-hostile interactions between Indians and emigrants, the focus on violence has obscured the larger issue of frequent and amicable interactions between emigrants and Indian peoples along the overland route. Factors such as trade, the availability of resources, and cultural differences influenced the nature of these inter-ethnic interactions, which varied from the beginning of the trail on the Plains to the end of the trail on the Columbia Plateau.

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For My Mother, LuCretia.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. INDIAN AND EMIGRANT EXPECTATIONS ALONG THE OVERLAND TRAIL ROUTE.....	18
Indian Expectations.....	18
Emigrant Expectations.....	32
III. ONTO THE PLAINS: INDIAN AND EMIGRANT INTERACTIONS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE OVERLAND TRAIL.....	51
IV. BEWARE OF THE SNAKE: INDIAN AND EMIGRANT INTERACTIONS AT THE END OF THE OREGON TRAIL.....	73
V. CONCLUSION.....	103
REFERENCES CITED.....	108

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The overland migrations of the mid-nineteenth century have been a topic of American popular culture and scholarship of the American West since the first “great migration” slogged west in 1843. “The Oregon Trail” conjures images of covered wagons slowly trudging along in a single track across the plains as men in wide-brimmed hats steer from the buckboard and women in ankle-length dresses and bonnets sit beside the wagon driver. For many Americans, the overland trail migrations exemplify American exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny. For many historians, the massive collection of primary source material that was produced by emigrants has yielded (and continues to yield) rich scholarship on the American West.¹

Overlanders who emigrated west along the series of routes that were collectively known as the “overland trail” often chronicled their journey in diaries or journals as part of a tradition that was introduced at the turn of the nineteenth century by the Lewis and

¹ The overland or Oregon trail is defined in this study as the collection of routes that facilitated overland emigration to the western coast between 1840 and 1860. This study is framed by these two decades as they are representative of the emigration phenomena, yet there was significant change that occurred in those two decades. The trail began at “jumping off places” in St. Joseph or Independence Missouri, although many emigrants had already traveled some distance west to arrive at that point. This study tracks the movements of missionaries, farmers, families, and argonauts as they crossed the plains and the Rocky Mountains. At Fort Hall in present day Idaho, the trail forked and emigrants to California and Utah turned south while emigrants en route to Oregon headed northwest. This study follows emigrants who continued on to Oregon territory after leaving Fort Hall. This study interchanges the terms “Americans” with “emigrants,” and the term “Indian” is used as a general term to describe Native people when it is not possible to represent specific Indian national identities or affiliations. At times other terms are used; It must also be stated that within each of these distinctions exists a complex mix of personal identities tied to European heritage, gender, religion, and economic or social status, which cannot possibly be addressed in detail in the scope of this study.

Clark expedition.² Meriwether Lewis and William Clark kept detailed accounts of their journey as part of their job as emissaries and explorers employed by the United States. Similarly, many of the diaries maintained on the overland trail were detailed and thorough. Often these earlier journals were published by their authors to serve as guides for future emigrants. Some of the early emigrants were missionaries such as the infamous Whitmans, some were employed as record keepers for larger expeditions, and some, like John C. Frémont, were employed by the United States government as official surveyors.³ These earlier emigrants tended to be highly literate, and their journals reflected a literary eloquence that helped further the practice of journal writing as a overland tradition. As those early migrations grew into the great migrations of 1843 and 1849-50, the practice of journaling became a fixture of the journey undertaken by writers of varying degrees of literacy.⁴

Writing eloquence and spelling varied as much as the content of journals. Some diaries catalogued important events along their journey: accidents, deaths, significant losses or triumphs. Others offered more strict forms of accounting of goods or, more

² The entirety of the Lewis and Clark Journals have been chronicled and are available as an online archive by the University of Nebraska. The journals can be found at <http://lewisandclarkjournals.unl.edu/>.

³ Marcus and Narcissa Whitman first travelled to Oregon in 1836, where they operated a small mission until their murder at the hands of Cayuse Indians in 1847. For more information, see John D. Unruh, *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), pp. 118, 360-364. Thomas J. Farnham is one example of a member of a train who was employed with the duty of cataloging the journey for a company. See Thomas J. Farnham, *An 1839 Wagon Train Journal: Travels in the Great Western Prairies and in the Oregon Territory* (New York: Greeley & McElrath Tribune Buildings, 1843). John Charles Frémont kept detailed records of his travels in the West. The maps that he meticulously drew were used by overlanders during the migrations. The entirety of his journals from the 1838-1844 expedition have been transcribed and archived online. See John C. Frémont, "The Expeditions of John Charles Frémont" *The Internet Archive*, accessed March 16 2014, http://www.archive.org/stream/expeditionsofjoh01fr/expeditionsofjoh01fr_djvu.txt.

⁴ John D. Unruh in *The Plains Across* discusses these years as being of importance due to the large number of overland emigrations that occurred, 4-5.

commonly, of mileage undertaken in a given day's travel. Trail conditions were often of the utmost concern, but at other times it was the size of rattlesnakes or the presence of trailside grave sites that were predominant topics in emigrants' journals. Perhaps the most prevalent topic of overlanders' diaries was encounters with Indians.

This study makes several arguments that build upon and advance the historiography of the overland trail migrations. Interactions between American emigrants and Indian peoples were overwhelmingly amicable. Those interactions largely occurred in the form of trade and differed from the Plains region of the trail to the Northwest region. The regional differences in Indians and emigrant interactions were largely the result of differing environmental conditions that were impacted by emigrants and cultural considerations among distinct Native peoples and their responses to the intrusion of overland migration. Along the entirety of the overland route, emigrants' preconceived expectations of Indians as hostile people affected interactions between the two and contradicted the true nature of the overwhelming majority of those interactions. Finally, the phenomenon of Americans' expectations of Indian peoples consistently contradicting the reality of their interactions was part of a tradition of historical memory that was used as justification for asserting settler colonial claims.

Emigrants who traveled west operated under a set of assumptions that influenced how they perceived and interacted with Native people. After they left the relative safety of the American border in Missouri, emigrants—consumed with anxiety—wrote of their fear of being attacked by Indians at any moment, especially after dark. These fears were seemingly validated by guidebooks that provided migrants with information and advice

about successfully navigating the overland trails. Some guidebooks were better than others. Some clearly laid out the most easily traveled or direct western routes, while others steered travelers over less well-tested proprietary routes that were discovered and their use promoted by the guide's author. However, there was an underlying cultural history that informed overlanders and the authors of guidebooks. For nearly two centuries, Americans and their European colonial predecessors had written horrific accounts of being taken captive by hostile Native people. Yet, there appears to be a more direct connection between captivity narratives and guidebooks than just a historical consciousness.

A common theme in these writings was to denigrate Indians before the writer had even encountered any upon the trail. Often emigrants interacted with Indians only days after crossing the Missouri River, and their encounters were almost always amicable. Yet, if these pleasant interactions inspired emigrants to reconsider how they wrote of Indians or brought to attention the irony of Indians acting nothing like the savages that they wrote about, there appears to be no record of such epiphanies in surviving trail diaries. Instead, many emigrants' journals remained committed to describing Indians negatively even though their interactions with Indian people contradicted those depictions. Some did alter their expectations by the time they neared the end of the trail. However, emigrants did not generally demonstrate an awareness of the disconnect between how they expected Indians to act and the more peaceful reality of Indian interactions.

Numerous Indian groups with distinct cultures lived along the two thousand mile overland routes between Missouri and Oregon in the nineteenth century. The series of

trails that comprised the “Oregon Trail” cut through the territories of the Pawnee, Sioux, Shoshone, Nez Perce, Cayuse, Umatilla, and The Dalles peoples, to name just a few.

American emigrants who passed through distinct Indian territories were more aware of the diversity of cultural identities of Indian peoples than Americans in general at the turn of the twentieth century. Yet, despite emigrants’ acknowledgement of different Indian groups, they tended to write about differing groups in very similar terms, often placing Indians into one of two categories: hostile or friendly. The presence of this binary is another common theme found in emigrants’ journals.

Indian peoples carried their own expectations about encountering Americans along the overland trail. Sadly, few written accounts by Indians exist. However, federal Indian Agents were tasked with the job of cataloging the grievances of the people placed under their supervision. Through these records, collected annually in the *Report to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, it is possible to find concerns raised by various Indian groups. Just as emigrants’ fears of Indians was a common theme found in emigrant journals, Indian complaints of migrant trespasses upon their lands and the resulting degradation of natural resources were just as common a theme.

When emigrants encountered Indian peoples, the overwhelming majority of interactions were not hostile. Emigrants immediately found themselves traversing Indian Country after crossing the Missouri River. Within days they encountered Indian people of various nations traveling the same trail that led emigrants west. Soon they entered Pawnee country. Many emigrants had traded with Indians on the trail before seeing their first trading post, but for those who had not, the trading post at Robidoux Pass in western

Nebraska brought them face to face with Indians who lived alongside traders of European descent. Trade was commonplace along the overland trails, and the benefits of trade were often mutual.

Previous scholarship has focused on the nature of interactions between Indians and white Americans, usually measured in terms of violence. However, the preoccupation with determining whether or not interactions were violent or peaceful overlooks a crucial component of the story of the overland trail migrations. Emigrant journals are filled with Indian encounters that are so numerous that they become mundane. Many diaries that began with apprehension about Indians soon began to treat the sight of Indians as mundane. By focusing on whether or not these encounters turned violent, scholars have missed an opportunity to examine the frequency and nature of inter-ethnic relationships that were prevalent along the overland trails.

That emigrants' preconceptions influenced their expectations about Indians does not mean those anxieties were utterly without merit. The overland trails were places of significant danger, filled with wide open spaces that at night closed in upon the parties in the darkness of the open plains. While the negative effect of those anxieties on Native people who were at significantly higher danger of violence at the hands of Americans than the other way around is clear today, from the emigrant's perspective it was a frequent behavior to focus the uncertainty and anxiety of the trail onto a cultural other.⁵ While we cannot expressly fault small groups of Americans for feeling anxious in unfamiliar territory as they traveled nearly two thousand miles from home, we can

⁵ John D. Unruh in *The Plains Across* calculated the overall number of deaths for both emigrants and Indians between the years of 1840 and 1860. See graph on page 185. Unruh stated that 362 emigrants had been killed by Indians, and that 426 Indians had been killed by emigrants.

critique the ways in which those anxieties had widespread ramifications for numerous groups of Indian people.

There exists an extensive historiography on the overland trail migrations. John D. Unruh's comprehensive monograph *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60* was first published posthumously in 1979. Unruh observed that the "record of overland emigrations" has been "presented in either the narrowly particular or the broadly general."⁶ His work then, sought to engage with material that had become "a veritable 'folk literature' of one of the nations' great achievements" with a "comprehensive analytical and interpretive" focus.⁷ *The Plains Across* was the cumulative result of a decade of applying a comprehensive analytical interpretation to the subject of the overland trail migrations of the mid-nineteenth century that yielded a wealth of information that historians have relied upon.

Unruh produced a wealth of statistical data regarding overland migrations, including estimates for emigrants headed to both Oregon and California, and statistics for Indian and migrant deaths at the hands of one another. Ultimately between the period of 1840 and 1860, Indians killed 362 whites while whites killed 426 Indians.⁸ In regard to the danger faced by whites along the trail, not only does Unruh's research demonstrate that Indians had more to fear than whites, but also that out of the total number of emigrants who traveled the overland trail to Oregon (just over 53,000, with another

⁶ John D. Unruh, *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 4.

⁷ Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 4.

⁸ Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 185.

200,335 going to California), the 362 deaths at the hands of Indians represents less than 1 percent of the total number of emigrants.

Unruh's work is perhaps most widely cited for his interpretation of violent encounters. Indeed one of the most important contributions from *The Plains Across* was its assertion that Indians were not usually the aggressors toward defenseless emigrants. While Unruh himself addressed numerous ways in which Indians and emigrants interacted amicably with one another, historians have tended to engage with Unruh's close attention to the numbers of deaths of both Indians and emigrants which has obscured a larger issue in the historiography of the overland migrations: that emigrants and Indians were frequently in contact with one another. Certainly Unruh would have acknowledged this, as evidenced by another important contribution of *The Plains Across*—its extensive treatment of Indian and emigrant trade. While it was the close source analysis and statistical presentation that set Unruh's work apart from other overland trail works, closely working with numbers may have resulted in a failure to make larger thematic connections.

A recent work by historian Michael Tate, *Indians and Emigrants: Encounters on the Overland Trails*, closes the near thirty year gap of significant historical work on the overland trail migrations since *The Plains Across*. Tate's study draws on the detailed analysis of *The Plains Across* but looks more closely at the on-the-ground interactions of different ethnic and cultural groups occupying the same space. Like Unruh, Tate argues that violent encounters between Indian people and American emigrants were rare and that instead of a "contested meeting ground" the overland trail was a "cooperative meeting

ground.”⁹ Tate explores the role of emigrants’ anxieties and concludes that while captivity narratives were partially responsible for those anxieties, a larger “spirit of romanticism” was disseminated through art, music and literature.¹⁰ Yet, Tate’s interpretation of violence appears to echo that of John Unruh as he argues that anxiety caused by rumors of Indian attacks left emigrants in a constant state of vigilance that was more predominantly harmful to the well-being of emigrants than actual instances of Indian attacks—an assertion that is reflected in this study.¹¹ Tate further argues that “the great majority of people who voiced so much alarm about American Indians had never experienced any direct contact with them.”¹² The implication is that emigrants held these preconceptions only before encountering Indian people. The survey of emigrant diaries that are the basis for this study clearly show that emigrants consistently continued to project hostility onto Indian people in spite of experiencing overwhelmingly positive interactions with them.

John Mack Faragher conducted a study of families during the great migrations published in 1979. The strongest contribution of *Women & Men on the Overland Trail* was the focus it placed upon the ways in which women and men on the overland trail shared the experience as reflected through their writings, and the ways in which the shared experience broke down along gender lines. Faragher observed that during the fur trade the majority of people traveling west across North America were men.¹³ Yet, by the

⁹ Michael L. Tate, *Indians and Emigrants: Encounters on the Overland Trails* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), 233.

¹⁰ Tate, *Indians and Emigrants*, 4-5.

¹¹ For American anxieties caused by rumors of Indian attacks, see p. xiii-xiv, for the tolls on emigrants caused by constant vigilance, see p. 10 of *Indians and Emigrants*.

¹² Tate, *Indians and Emigrants*, 4.

¹³ John Mack Faragher, *Women & Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven: Yale Nota Bene, 2001), 34.

mid-nineteenth century “women constituted 15 to 20 percent of all emigrants.”¹⁴ Faragher further noted that as the first decade of the overland trail migrations rolled into the second, women and families continued to increasingly undertake the trip west, even in the midst of the gold fever that struck the country between 1849 and 1852.¹⁵ Faragher described overlap between the diaries of men and women in the themes of “practical matters, health and safety, and natural beauty” but maintained that women tended to be more concerned about issues relating to the cohesion of the family and interpersonal relationships, while men were “concerned with violence and aggression—fights, conflicts, and competition, and most of all hunting.”¹⁶ Despite Faragher’s focus on families on the trail, and not Indian and emigrant interactions, he does have something to say about those encounters—namely that interactions between Indians and emigrants were not common. He wrote “the majority of emigrants, in fact, saw very few Indians along the route”—an assertion that again conflicts with the findings of this study.¹⁷ There could be several explanations for the discrepancies in historical interpretations of how frequently Indians and emigrants were interacting amicably, the most simple of which is that there are an immense number of diaries. Depending on which diaries are used as a source base, it is possible to find corroborating or conflicting information from one group of sources to another.

¹⁴ Faragher, *Women & Men on the Overland Trail*, 34.

¹⁵ Faragher, *Women & Men on the Overland Trail*, 35.

¹⁶ Faragher, *Women & Men on the Overland Trail*, 14.

¹⁷ Faragher, *Women & Men on the Overland Trail*, 31.

Elliot West's 1998 monograph, *The Contested Plains*, examines only a portion of the plains—from Missouri to Colorado—during the gold rush that started in 1858. West's study was situated south of the majority of overland trails, but examines the plains along a parallel route that addressed several themes relevant to the overland migrations. While this work may appear to be limited in scope and geography, in fact West thoroughly examined the natural history of the western Rocky Mountains and the plains that led up to them in order to describe how the natural history of North America, and the indigenous people who inhabited the area, changed over millennia and how they interacted with overlanders. West identified that “the great stampede changed the plains at least as much as the mountains, and yet we have kept our gaze on what was rushed *to* rather than what was rushed *over*.”¹⁸

The Contested Plains simultaneously traced how cultures on the plains met, clashed, and changed while giving similar considerations to the ways in which the environment of the plains adapted or collapsed under the strain of shifting power balances. West wove together histories of Pawnee, Sioux, and Cheyenne people into a narrative that described changes in power dynamics and the effects that these changes had on seasonal migrations, trade relationships, and land use among Indian peoples in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁹ Americans in search of gold, or taking part in the overland trail migrations complicated the already tumultuous period.

¹⁸ Elliott West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998), xvii.

¹⁹ For a detailed examination of these issues, see Chapter Four “The Called Out People,” Elliott West, *The Plains Across*, 63-93.

The themes of Indian and emigrant interaction and the ecological consequences of overland migration in the story of the rush to Colorado are parallel to conditions that were present in the overland trail migrations farther north. The intermarriage of Indian people with European traders who settled their families onto the plains became the foundation for the small trading posts mentioned frequently in emigrant journals.²⁰ Disease, drought, and the pressures of adequately caring for large herds of horses placed Cheyenne people in a position of dependence upon trade with Americans.²¹ Finally, the ways in which these increasingly constrictive forces pressured Cheyenne people into blaming and violently pushing back against Americans are typical of other portions of the overland trail.²²

This study relies primarily on emigrant journals and diaries as primary sources in an attempt to identify common themes found within the writings of emigrants and continue to develop the arguments made by John D. Unruh and Michael Tate. Overlanders' diaries provide a consistent cultural barometer of the mid-nineteenth century. Thousands of journals and diaries were by emigrants, and untold numbers of them have been preserved in archives throughout the United States. Some emigrants wrote extensively in their journals; others briefly jotted down short notes that catalogued

²⁰ West, *The Contested Plains*, 79-81.

²¹ West, *The Contested Plains*, 86-91.

²² West, *The Contested Plains*, 91-92.

the distance they traveled on a given day. Collectively, overland trail diaries provide insights into the preoccupations of nineteenth century emigrants.²³

This study utilizes several of these works. Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail*, one of the most well-known overland trail accounts, chronicles Parkman's explorations in 1846 and has been printed in numerous iterations.²⁴ The 1849 diaries of Vincent Geiger and Wakeman Bryarly, who together found adventure en route to the gold fields of California, have been published collectively as one volume.²⁵ Joel Palmer's *Journal of Travels* includes several detailed interactions with Indian peoples on the Plains and in Oregon.²⁶ The enticingly titled *Surviving the Oregon Trail* contains the 1852 accounts of Mary Ann and Willis Boatman, who also traveled to Oregon and had both good and bad encounters with Indians along the way.²⁷ These widely-read volumes are sources of invaluable detailed descriptions of emigrants' experiences along the overland trails.

Some trail journals were turned into guidebooks that many overland travelers relied on. These guides informed travelers about varying aspects of life on the trail, from the essential goods to bring on the journey, the best route to take, distances between

²³ This study resulted from a survey of nearly a hundred emigrant journals housed at the Bancroft Library at the University of California in Berkeley, and the Knight Library at the University of Oregon in Eugene. The majority of trail diaries and journals for this study are part of the Western Americana Collection. See Western Americana Collection, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, California. The remaining journals are part of the Accounts of Journeys to the Pacific Northwest, Special Collections, Knight Library, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

²⁴ Francis Parkman, *The Oregon Trail*, edited by Mason Wade (Norwalk: Heritage Press, 1971).

²⁵ Vincent Geiger and Wakeman Bryarly, *Trail to California: The Overland Journal of Vincent Geiger & Wakeman Bryarly*, edited by David M. Potter (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962).

²⁶ Joel Palmer, *Journal of Travels: Over the Oregon Trail in 1845* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1993).

²⁷ Mary Ann and Willis Boatman, *Surviving The Oregon Trail: 1852 As Told By Mary Ann and Willis Boatman and Augmented with Accounts by Other Overland Travelers*, edited by Weldon Willis Rau (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 2001).

landmarks, and how to navigate hazards, to anecdotal tales of encounters with hostile Indians. Guidebooks varied tremendously in quality and accuracy as they expressed the personal opinions of their authors and were occasionally penned by charlatans whose primary concern was guidebook sales. This study engages with well-known–tried and trusted–guidebooks both as detailed trail narratives and as a means of tracing emigrants disseminated rumors of Indian brutality. Lansford Hastings wrote one of the most-trusted guidebooks used by emigrants after 1845.²⁸ Hosea B. Horn wrote a brief overland guide that provided detailed descriptions of the terrain and features of the plains and the trail to California.²⁹ Thomas J. Farnham’s account, *An 1839 Wagon Train Journal: Travels in the Great Western Prairies and in the Oregon Territory*, published in 1843, is one example of a member of a wagon company whose duty was cataloging the journey, which he later published as a guide book.³⁰ Finally, U.S. Army Captain Randolph B. Marcy turned his 1859 trail narrative into a guide book that included best routes, first aid suggestions, and a slew of other helpful information for travelers.³¹

Captivity narratives were the most popular secular writings of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. These firsthand narratives written by settlers who were captured by Indians, often to be sold to competing colonial empires (for example British colonists

²⁸ Lansford W. Hastings, *The Emigrant’s Guide to Oregon and California* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1932).

²⁹ Hosea B. Horn, *Horn’s Overland Guide, From the U.S. Indian Sub-Agency, Council Bluffs, on the Missouri River, to the city of Sacramento, in California: Containing a Table of Distances...* (New York: J.H. Colton, 1852).

³⁰ Thomas J. Farnham, *An 1839 Wagon Train Journal: Travels in the Great Western Prairies and in the Oregon Territory* (New York: Greeley & McElrath Tribune Buildings, 1843).

³¹ Randolph B. Marcy, *The Prairie Traveler: A Hand-Book For Overland Expeditions* (Carlisle: Applewood Books, 1993).

were captured by Indians and handed over to the French who imprisoned them), informed colonial perceptions of Indians' propensity for violence. This popular perception was continuously reinforced through captivity narratives that shared a common structure. Guide books reinforced many of the same messages about Indians on the overland trail and utilized a structure that resembled captivity narratives. While the individual accounts may be harrowing, captivity narratives collectively say something different than they do individually. Whatever awful things may have happened to individuals at the hands of Indians from the time that Europeans began settling the eastern seaboard until into the twentieth century were still isolated and relatively rare occurrences.³² In this study I use Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence* in dialogue with early nineteenth century captivity narratives and the guidebooks that mimic them to examine the history of Indian savagery in the American psyche and as a process of ideological colonialism.³³

Indian voices prove elusive. However, historians can get a sense of how Indian people experienced the overland trail migrations by studying what they reportedly said to those who kept records. The United States government's involvement in Indian affairs has left historians with a detailed document trail. Certainly, utilizing United States government documents as a means for interpreting Indian concerns can be problematic. In many cases, the annual reports made to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs reflected what a particular Indian Agent thought was the most pressing matter. What constitutes

³² A series of captivity narratives were published throughout the 1970s by the Garland Library at Cornell University. Many of these narratives, spanning the seventeenth to twentieth centuries, have been digitized and are available through their online archive. This study engages with a selection of narratives from this collection. For details on the collections, see "The Garland Library of Narratives of North American Indian Captivities at Cornell," <http://olinuris.library.cornell.edu/ref/garland.html>.

³³ Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973).

“pressing” could potentially mean what Indian people were complaining to their agent about the most or the loudest, or it could simply reflect the priorities of individual agents. One way to compensate for a potential bias is to correlate overlaps between Indian agent reports and treaties. For example, if agents are reporting Indian concerns regarding Anglo-American trespassing and those concerns were addressed as part of a treaty, it is fair to conclude that these were issues that were important to Indian people.

This study is arranged in three chapters. Chapter One examines the different expectations that both American and Indian people held about encounters with one another. This chapter explores the ways in which American expectations of violent Indians were informed by a cultural consciousness rooted in seventeenth century encounters and resulted in a general anxiety about Indian people. Indian expectations were informed by concerns of emigrants’ actions. Indian people forced into reciprocal relationships with U.S. government agents voiced their concerns about the destruction caused by overland immigration through their treaty-protected spaces. Chapter Two demonstrates the reality of Indian and emigrant interactions along the first half of the trail—from the Missouri River to the Plains and onto the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains—as reflected through emigrant journals and Indian agent reports. Chapter Three utilizes a similar framework as Chapter Two, but examines the second half of the trail, from the Rocky Mountains to Oregon. Each of these two chapters seeks to identify the reality of interactions between Americans and Indians, and to understand the nature of those interactions. Since some portions of the overland trail correlated with more or less hostile inter-ethnic encounters, a final consideration of this study is to determine whether

certain factors, such as resource availability, trade, or cultural interpretations resulted in deteriorated interactions between emigrants and Indians at specific points along the overland trail route.

CHAPTER II
INDIAN AND EMIGRANT EXPECTATIONS ALONG
THE OVERLAND TRAIL ROUTE

“You come into our country and select a small patch of ground, around which you run a line, and tell us the President will make us a present of this to live upon, when every body knows that the whole of this entire country, from the Red River to the Colorado, is now, and always has been, ours from time immemorial. I suppose, however, if the President tells us to confine ourselves to these narrow limits, we shall be forced to do so, whether we desire it or not.” - Senaco (Comanche Nation) - 1854¹

"Our men all carried their guns today, having an advance guard to give notice of any Indians seen. We do not know at what moment we may be surrounded by them, but with preparation and vigilance will get along." Esther Belle Hannah - July 25 - 1852²

Indian Expectations

“My white brothers - my long-looked for white brothers have come at last!” exclaimed the grandfather of Sarah Winnemucca, a young Paiute woman born in Nevada.³ In her late-nineteenth century memoir, Winnemucca recalled the first time she witnessed her grandfather rushing outside excitedly to greet emigrants traveling close to their camp. The scene quickly shifted as her grandfather intercepted the party of travelers before he was “commanded to halt in a manner that was readily understood without an interpreter,” at which point he “made signs of friendship by throwing down his robe and

¹ Randolph B. Marcy, *The Prairie Traveler: A Hand-Book For Overland Expeditions* (Carlisle:Applewood Books, 1993), 218.

² Esther Belle Hannah, “Diary,” July 25, 1852, BANC MSS P-A 313, Western Americana Collection, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Berkeley, California.

³ Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, *Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims*, ed. Horace Mann, (Boston: Cupples, Upham & Co., 1883), 5.

throwing up his arms to show them he had no weapons.”⁴ To her grandfather’s dismay the travelers, whom he was so excited to meet, kept their distance from him. Sarah Winnemucca’s grandfather did not have to wait long for his amicable encounter with those whom her father had referred to as his “white brothers,” as the next year he met John C. Frémont en route to an exploratory mission in California. Frémont was so taken with the man who assisted the expedition with navigational guidance that he named a river and a road for him.⁵ His name was Truckee, the chief of the Paiute. Her father was decidedly less enthusiastic about white emigrants than her grandfather had been, but he remarked that “these white people must be a great nation, as they have houses that move,” indicating that he held some level of respectful curiosity for the strangers’ culture.⁶ Winnemucca’s reminiscence of emigrants greeting Indians with suspicion and of Indians receiving emigrants with enthusiasm in the early 1840s is a telling example of the different expectations that shaped the interactions of Indians and emigrants on the overland trails.

The series of trails that comprised the overland migration routes passed through dozens of Indian lands. The main road to Oregon cut through Indian territories immediately after crossing the Missouri river. The Kansa people occupied the northeastern portion of the present day state of Kansas. Emigrants leaving from Independence or St. Joseph, Missouri, would cross the Kansa territory as they headed

⁴ Hopkins, *Life Among the Piutes*, 5-6.

⁵ John D. Unruh, *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 156.

⁶ Hopkins, *Life Among the Piutes*, 14.

northwest towards the Platte River.⁷ Those who jumped off from Council Bluffs in Iowa passed through the territory of the Sac and Fox Indians as they moved southwest to the Platte.⁸ Within days of steady travel, the overland trail passed through Pawnee territory with the Platte river at its southern border.⁹ At the western edge of what is now Nebraska, the trail passed between Cheyenne and Sioux territory to the north, and Arapahoe territory to the south.¹⁰ All three of these territories overlapped onto the trail route. The Western Shoshone occupied much of present day Nevada but their territory extended into southern Idaho.¹¹ The Nez Perces, a seasonally mobile horse culture, migrated between northwestern Idaho, southern Washington, and northern Oregon. The Nez Perces regularly traded with, and traveled among, the Umatilla and Walla Walla tribes (who were connected through the Sahaptian language family, although the Nez Perces were a more semi-nomadic horse culture), which inhabited the Columbia River basin in northern Oregon and southern Washington.¹² Emigrants who turned south at Oregon City and

⁷ William E. Unrau, *The Kansa Indians: A History of the Wind People, 1673-1873* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 14, 164.

⁸ William T. Hagan, *The Sac and Fox Indians* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), 221-28.

⁹ George E. Hyde, *The Pawnee Indians* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951), 120-21.

¹⁰ Clark Wissler, ed., *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, Vol. XI: Societies of the Plains Indians* (New York: Published By Order of the Trustees of the American Museum of Natural History, 1916), iv.

¹¹ Steven J. Crum, *The Road on Which We Came: A History of the Western Shoshone* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994), 3.

¹² Robert Boyd, *People of the Dalles: The Indians of Wascopam Mission* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 35.

traveled past the Willamette Valley were likely to pass through the so-called Rogue River bands' territories that extended from present day Medford to the coast.¹³

Each of these territorial lands was occupied by distinct cultures who had unique expectations of contact with overland emigrants. Many of the peoples of the plains up to the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountains had experienced a longer history of exposure to European-descended people as the American frontier continuously pushed west. While many of the coastal peoples of the Pacific Northwest had experience with the trading colonies of England, Russia, and France, most Native people from the Rocky Mountains to the interior areas of the Northwest had, with the exception of fur trappers, never encountered European-descended people until Lewis and Clark passed through their territories at the turn of the nineteenth century. Whether or not Indian people had seen or met Americans or Europeans, these recent inhabitants of North America had made their presence known to Native people through material trade goods, horses, and disease.¹⁴ Therefore, even Indians who were encountering Americans or Europeans for the first time had expectations based on the experiences of others and a familiarity with the goods they traded.

It is difficult to find documents that record Indian voices from different cultures along the two thousand mile overland trail route. However, by the middle of the nineteenth century, these groups were often in contact with representatives of the United

¹³ Treaties distinguished these bands collectively as the "Rogue River Valley" Indians, but several bands were grouped under that derogatory name. The Tututni and Coquille inhabited the coast near the California border, while the Taltushtuntudes and Dakubetedes lived along the upper Rogue River near present day Medford. Please see the map on page 39 of Robert H. Ruby and John A. Brown, *Indians of the Pacific Northwest: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981).

¹⁴ Elliott West, *The Last Indian War: The Nez Perce Story* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 15-19.

States Government. Each year, local Indian Agents sent their annual reports to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C. It was the Indian Agent's duty to report not only what he determined to be the condition of the particular band, tribe, or nation within his jurisdiction, but to also report important events and relay the concerns of the people attached to said agency. While there was a potential for bias in what individual agents reported in these official documents, there were instances where the concerns voiced to Indian Agents, as reflected through their annual reports, were also addressed in formal treaties between the United States Government and numerous Indian nations. The concerns that Indian people voiced to government agents stand in for other written sources inform us of Indians' expectations of encountering Americans in their territories.

In one typical example, a treaty signed in January 1846 formalized the removal of the Kansa Indians west of their former territory to the Neosho Valley in northeastern Kansas—approximately fifty miles west of the Missouri River.¹⁵ In addition to ceding their former lands for which they were monetarily compensated two hundred and two thousand dollars (with five percent interest for thirty years), the treaty of 1846 addressed Kansa concerns about their newly designated territory south of the Platte River having been stripped of timber. Article 5 of the treaty stipulated that should the territory be found wanting of timber, the President “shall cause to be selected and laid off for the Kansas a suitable country, near the western boundary of the land ceded by this treaty, which shall

¹⁵ William E. Unrau, *The Kansa Indians: A History of the Wind People, 1673-1873* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 164.

remain for their use forever.”¹⁶ Timber was a resource that was voraciously consumed by emigrants along the overland trails, and the Kansa people were being placed right in the path of destruction.¹⁷

In September 1846 T.H. Harvey, the superintendent of Indian affairs at St. Louis who had overseen the signing of the treaty in January of that year, addressed other Indian concerns of natural resource management in his annual report to the commissioner of Indian affairs.¹⁸ Harvey reported that “the condition of the Indians on the western prairies, who live almost exclusively upon the buffalo, must, by the force of circumstances, in a few years be exceedingly precarious.”¹⁹ Harvey described the buffalo as having been “already greatly diminished in number” and attributed their decline to westward emigration, since “all experience proves that game rapidly disappears before the fire-arms of the white man.”²⁰ Harvey warned, before continuing on to other matters, that “when the buffalo become scarce, the stock and persons of the emigrants will hardly

¹⁶ Charles J. Kappler, ed., *Indian Treaties: 1778-1883 Vol. 2* (New York: Interland Publishing, 1972), 553.

¹⁷ Based on a survey of emigrant diaries and journals, the availability and use of wood for cooking fires was a common topic.

¹⁸ *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the years 1846-1847*, 70-76, University of Wisconsin Digital Collections, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/History.AnnRep4650>, accessed March 28, 2014.

¹⁹ *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the years 1846-1847*, 75, University of Wisconsin Digital Collections, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/History.AnnRep4650>, accessed March 28, 2014.

²⁰ *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the years 1846-1847*, 75, University of Wisconsin Digital Collections, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/History.AnnRep4650>, accessed March 28, 2014.

be safe in meeting with half-famished savages in pursuit of game, especially when they look upon the emigrants as the cause of the scarcity of their source of subsistence.”²¹

While some treaties addressed Indian concerns about the conditions of their new homes on the Plains, they were also used by the United States to facilitate western expansion, and at times they did both. The U.S. government’s attempt to control the Indian people of the Plains was further evident in two treaties with the Pawnee nation. In an 1833 treaty, the Pawnees relinquished some lands which would then be reserved for communal hunting grounds. The Pawnees also agreed, in the spirit of achieving peace on the Plains, “not to molest or injure the person or property of any white citizen of the United States, wherever found, nor to make war upon any tribe with whom said Pawnee nation now are, or may be, at peace” and to allow the United States to act as arbiter of any disputes that may arise.²² The government’s attempt to pacify the plains peoples was ongoing prior to the start of significant overland emigration. Once American emigration across the plains was a common occurrence after 1843, treaty language reflected the government’s commitment to protecting its citizens crossing through Indian territories. In an 1857 treaty, the Pawnees agreed to “permit the United States to build forts and occupy military posts on their lands, and to allow the whites the right to open roads through their territories.”²³

²¹ *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the years 1846-1847*, 75, University of Wisconsin Digital Collections, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/History.AnnRep4650>, accessed March 28, 2014.

²² Kappler, ed., *Indian Treaties*, 417.

²³ Kappler, ed., *Indian Treaties*, 766.

In September 1851, representatives of the United States government and a handful of interpreters prepared to meet with Indians of the Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapahoe, Crow, Assinaboine, Mandan, and Arickaree nations along Horse Creek, a small tributary of the Platte River that lay a few miles outside of the walls of Fort Laramie.²⁴ Over the course of three weeks, an estimated ten thousand Indians gathered and camped around the fort.²⁵ For over two weeks the Indians and Americans held council where they smoked ceremonial tobacco while the Americans, led by Superintendent of Indian Affairs D. D. Mitchell, proposed new agreements that they had drafted into treaties and the Indians articulated the concerns of their respective peoples.²⁶ Mitchell pushed the Indians to choose a head “chief,” who could be responsible for their people and who could be the point of contact in negotiations. Different Indian nations responded differently to this request. The Arapahoes conceded the issue and appointed Little Owl as their head chief. In response, an Arapahoe named Cut Nose suggested that the Americans remove themselves from intruding upon Indian lands so that the Arapahoes may hunt in peace and that Americans “should give us game for what they drive off.”²⁷

Sioux leaders were less willing to change their tribal organization to suit American desires. A Brulé chief, Blue Earth, countered the request for one chief to draw together all of the Sioux bands with the statement that “we want a chief for each band, and if you will make one or two chiefs for each band, it will be much better for you and

²⁴ Kappler, ed., *Indian Treaties*, 594.

²⁵ Raymond J. DeMallie, “Touching the Pen: Plains Indian Treaty Councils in Ethnohistorical Perspective,” in *Major Problems in American Indian History: Documents and Essays*, edited by Albert L. Hurtado and Peter Iverson. (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1994), 346-47.

²⁶ Kappler, ed., *Indian Treaties*, 594.

²⁷ DeMallie, “Touching the Pen,” 348-349.

the whites...But Father, we can't make one chief."²⁸ An Oglala member, Black Hawk, was less diplomatic with his opinion that the Americans had "split the country in half" and concluded that "I don't like it."²⁹ Black Hawk continued by objecting to the attempt to restrict the Sioux territory and stated "what we live upon we hunt for, and we hunt from the Platte to the Arkansas, and from here up to the Red But[t]e and the sweet water."³⁰

On September 17th, soldiers erected a tent to keep the sun and mosquitos at bay, but it mostly housed the uniformed white men who sat on wooden army field chairs behind a large wooden table. The Americans told the Indian men on the other side of the table that they wished for peace between Indian groups as well as between Indians and whites. To achieve that peace, each of these nations would have rigid territorial boundaries set, but in return Americans tried to assuage Indian concerns of sharing their land with emigrants and promised that migrants would only move through Indian territory, not settle on it. For there to be peace, moreover, the Indians would have to leave emigrants and enemy Indian nations alone.³¹

It is unlikely in the discussion following the translation of the treaty that the details contained within the document splayed out on the table were expressed explicitly,

²⁸ DeMallie, "Touching the Pen," 349.

²⁹ DeMallie, "Touching the Pen," 349.

³⁰ DeMallie, "Touching the Pen," 349.

³¹ Kappler, ed., *Indian Treaties*, 594.

or if they were, that they were understood in this brief meeting.³² It is far more likely that the main points were communicated: achieve peace with neighboring Indians, allow emigrants to pass over your lands, allow the government to erect forts along a narrow path, and you shall be left alone. After all, Indians on the Plains had sought peace with one another to varying degrees of success since the Great Peace of 1840, and one of the key factors in upsetting that peace had been the trampling of lands by white emigrants.³³ It was with this understanding—that the agreement in question would affect only those families in attendance (with the Government’s promise that they would contact other bands and enact similar agreements)—that twenty-one Indian men, beginning with members of the the Sioux bands, stood up and “touched the pen.”³⁴ This was the phrase they used to mean that they “made their mark” by signing an X next to their name written in English by the interpreters.³⁵ Within moments, the first Treaty of Fort Laramie was signed and witnessed, and with it the world of plains Indians became constrained through legal action, while the opportunities for white emigrants expanded along the frontier.

The terms of the 1851 treaty were specifically designed to address Indians’ concerns about being confined to and sharing the land they needed to survive with other

³² A member of the Yankton Sioux, Painted Bear, stated during the Fort Laramie councils that “this is the third time I have met with the whites. We do not understand their manners, nor their words. We know it is all very good, and for our own good, but we don’t understand it all. We suppose the half breeds understand it, and we leave them to speak for us.” See DeMallie, “Touching the Pen,” 350.

³³ Several plains societies including the Lakota Sioux and Cheyenne Indians “pledged friendship” with each other and reserved the southern plains east of the Rocky Mountains as communal hunting grounds. See West, *The Contested Plains*, 77.

³⁴ Kappler, ed., *Indian Treaties*, 596.

³⁵ Jeffrey Ostler, *The Plains Sioux and U.S. Colonialism From Lewis and Clark to Wounded Knee* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 37.

Indian groups and American emigrants.³⁶ Article 5 of the treaty laid out the specific boundaries of each nation's new reservation, which in some cases was actually a reduction in the land available to them in Indian territory, but scholars have suggested that the implication behind demarcated boundaries was emphasized as a means of making this seem as though the Indians were the beneficiaries of treaties.³⁷ Yet, the first four Articles of the treaty were explicitly designed to justify the expansion of the United States through Indian territory. In these articles, Indians agreed to cease any hostilities, to expressly allow the U.S. military to establish forts and maintain roads through Indian territory, and to allow themselves to be arbitrated (as well as protected) by the United States if any party should violate the terms of the treaty. Of course, those conditions were much more diligently applied to Indians than they were used in holding the United States accountable.

In the same year of the 1851 treaty, United States Indian agents addressed critical Indian concerns about conditions on the Plains and the potential for sustained tensions. In his 1851 annual report, Superintendent of Indian Affairs D. D. Mitchell related the details of the signing of the treaty at Fort Laramie and stated that the government had compensated "all former complaints on the part of Indians for the destruction of their buffalo, timber, &c., caused by the passing of the whites through their country."³⁸ In the following year, Mitchell asserted that "no depredations [have] been committed during the

³⁶ Kappler, ed., *Indian Treaties*, 594-596.

³⁷ Ostler, *The Plains Sioux*, 37, questions the accuracy of the interpretation and explanation of the details of the treaty of Fort Laramie.

³⁸ *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the years 1851*, 28, University of Wisconsin Digital Collections, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/History.AnnRep51>, accessed December 10 2013.

past season by any of the tribes, [or] parties to the Fort Laramie treaty.”³⁹ However, Mitchell again noted that “vast quantities of their game (their only means of subsistence) have been destroyed” in the process of American migration.⁴⁰ We could say, cynically, that Mitchell repeatedly addressed the problems caused by overland emigration within Indian communities because he had to face those people who held him responsible and accountable for the actions of the American government and its citizens, and we would be right to do so. However, there is something more to Mitchell’s reports from 1851 and 1852—an insistence that something was not right—which was not often found in other agents’ reports, suggesting that perhaps Mitchell was also pushing back against white encroachment through Indian lands on the Plains.

The lengthy council previous to, and the strong pushback from Indian people during, the 1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie suggest it was one of the most difficult treaties to negotiate so far along the overland trail route. The further the United States tried to push into Indian Territory, it seemed, the harder Indian people pushed back. Despite D. D. Mitchell’s reports in 1851 and 1852, which recognized the need for compensation from Americans who damaged Indian lands in order to maintain peace, treaties became more demanding against Indian people the farther west and the later the time.

In 1855, the United States underwent treaty negotiations with the Walla Walla, Umatilla, Cayuse and Nez Perces bands. Like the Fort Laramie Treaty council, thousands of members of these three bands showed up at the encampment at Mill Creek—with the

³⁹ *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the years 1852, 67*, University of Wisconsin Digital Collections. <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/History.AnnRep52>, accessed December 10 2013.

⁴⁰ *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the years 1852, 67*, University of Wisconsin Digital Collections. <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/History.AnnRep52>, accessed December 10 2013.

Nez Perces riding into camp in military-like formation.⁴¹ Isaac Stevens, the acting Governor and Superintendent of Indian Affairs for Washington territory, and Joel Palmer, the Superintendent of Indian Affairs for Oregon territory, had similar goals entering into the treaty councils as D.D. Mitchell had at Fort Laramie four years earlier. A reservation was to be set aside for the Walla Walla, Umatilla, and Cayuse bands who would have to communally hunt on said land.⁴² These bands would have to enter into an oath of peace with all other Indians and with the United States—including emigrants passing through their territory.⁴³ Despite the expectation that the Indians accept that “all roads, highways, and railroads shall have the right of way through the reservation,” the government did include a provision in Article 5 that an alternate wagon route would be explored to the south in an effort to keep hostilities between Indians and emigrants to a minimum.⁴⁴ These terms were met with dissatisfaction by the Indian contingent of the council. One Walla Walla member, Peopeo Moxmox, did not accept the idea of being monetarily compensated for his peoples’ territory. Peopeo Moxmox told Stevens and Palmer that “goods and the Earth are not equal...I do not know where they have given lands for goods.”⁴⁵ In spite of their hesitations, the tribes signed the 1855 treaty on June 9th.⁴⁶ On June 11th, The Nez Perces signed a similar treaty that set aside a separate reservation for them and granted “the exclusive right of taking fish in all the streams where running

⁴¹ West, *The Last Indian War*, 62.

⁴² Kappler, ed., *Indian Treaties*, 694.

⁴³ Kappler, ed., *Indian Treaties*, 696-97.

⁴⁴ Kappler, ed., *Indian Treaties*, 696-97.

⁴⁵ West, *The Last Indian War*, 64.

⁴⁶ Kappler, ed., *Indian Treaties*, 697-98.

through or bordering said reservation” to the them as well as allowing for the pasturing of horses.⁴⁷

Treaties, like overland emigrants, trundled west in the mid-nineteenth century. The United States placed Indian peoples strategically along the migration corridor in Kansas and Nebraska, so that they were technically in Indian Territory but removed far enough away as to allow the stream of emigration to continue with minimal intrusion. The U.S. government had less success initially with relocating plains tribes that had greater numbers and were more established, like the Pawnee and Sioux. In these cases, the government had to make some concessions based on the annual reports provided by agents like D.D. Mitchell. Persistent Indian agents in Washington and Oregon were able to negotiate treaties with the Indians of their agencies which confined many groups to specific territories and theoretically designated hunting and fishing grounds that were only for the people residing in those reservations.

As evidenced from Indian Agent reports and accounts of treaty councils, Indian people all along the overland trail route were concerned with the ability of their people to sustain themselves through hunting, fishing, or foraging. However, it also appears that Indians believed that the United States would honor its treaties, and that agreements promised to usher a new era of peace, or at least to avoid war. Of course, not all individual Indians or even collective bands were as optimistic, but given that most of the nearly twenty treaties signed between 1840 and 1860 along the emigration route were preceded by council meetings to which Indian people traveled far distances before

⁴⁷ Kappler, ed., *Indian Treaties*, 703.

ultimately signing, it is clear that Indian people were willing to engage with Americans for various reasons and to varying degrees. It is also clear that Indians expectations of Americans were primarily based on their individual and shared experiences with them.

Emigrant Expectations

Emigrants had an unusual and contradictory relationship with Native people along the overland routes. On the one hand, emigrants' written accounts reveal a suspicion of Indians that bordered on obsession. On the other hand, the same journals were filled with accounts of benign, and often friendly, interactions with Native people. Both of these types of descriptions were common in migrant journals, yet a sense of awareness of the irony of these two incongruent scenarios was not. The expectation that emigrants would encounter hostile Indians increased, rather than decreased, as the overland trail migrations continued over two decades despite emigrants recording scores of interactions with Indians that contradict those expectations.

Most emigrants carried a guidebook that they used to navigate their chosen route from east to west. Guidebooks varied in quality and the kinds of information they conveyed. Some guides were purported to be frauds that misled their readers in an attempt to promote one route over another, regardless of whether said route was longer or traveled over more difficult terrain.⁴⁸ Other guides, like *Horn's Overland Guide*, were straightforward attempts to get emigrants from one point to another with as much ease as possible and mainly listed the distances between landmarks and instructions for staying

⁴⁸ Elliott West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998), 128.

on the correct trail.⁴⁹ Some guides offered detailed narratives that were more stream-of-consciousness musings of the author than they were practical field guides.⁵⁰ Many of the more helpful overland guide books became popular, such as *The Prairie Traveler* written by Captain Randolph Marcy, in which the army captain implored his readers to travel in groups of 50-70 members “for protection against Indians” and to defend their encampments as though they were military installations.⁵¹ Despite having a functional, utilitarian purpose, many guidebooks interjected the experiences, musings, and personalities of their authors.

In many cases, the influence of guidebook authors affected migrants in their day-to-day interactions with the inhabitants of the lands across which the overland trail routes cut deeply. Thomas Farnham’s 1839 *Wagon Train Journal* narrative, at twice the length of the average trail guide, read like an adventure novel and was likely more useful to emigrants who were researching their impending trip from their homes in the East than it would have been as a field text, due to its meandering narrative.⁵² Emigrants using Farnham’s guide to plan their trip would have learned to expect to be among the Kauzaus (or Kansa) Indians within a week of departing from Independence. These Indians, wrote

⁴⁹ Hosea B. Horn, *Horn’s Overland Guide, From the U.S. Indian Sub-Agency, Council Bluffs, on the Missouri River; to the city of Sacramento, in California: Containing a Table of Distances...* (New York: J.H. Colton, 1852)

⁵⁰ Thomas J. Farnham, *An 1839 Wagon Train Journal: Travels in the Great Western Prairies and in the Oregon Territory* (New York: Greeley & McElrath Tribune Buildings, 1843; Reprint, Northwest Interpretive Association, 1983).

⁵¹ Marcy, *The Prairie Traveler*, 22, 56.

⁵² Thomas Farnham was hired to write the narrative of this wagon train by Horace Greeley who then published the account. The introduction to the 1983 reprint states that for Farnham, “utilizing his gift for writing, it was not difficult for him to describe his experiences in incredible detail.” However, much of Farnham’s detail was superfluous and likely of little practical use to emigrants. See Farnham, *An 1839 Wagon Train Journal*, Introduction.

Farnham, carried their muskets in a “peculiar” way, as to be “always prepared to fire.”⁵³ While Farnham characterized the Kauzaus as cautious people, who “watched us narrowly, as if to ascertain whether we were friends or foes,” once it was apparent that the emigrant party represented the former they sat down and smoked together by the fire. As the travelers moved through Kansa territory toward the Platte River, according to Farnham, they would find themselves in the “northern limit of the wanderings of the Cumanches” which was of interest to emigrants due to “their ten thousand warriors, their incomparable horsemanship, their terrible charge, the unequaled rapidity with which they load and discharge their fire-arms, and their insatiable hatred make their enmity more fearful than that of any other tribe of aborigines.”⁵⁴

Randolph Marcy’s *The Prairie Traveler* was a more practical field guide that served many emigrants on their overland journey. Marcy laid out the different routes to both Oregon and California in detail, as well as described what to take on the journey, how to pack a wagon, how to practice trailside first aid, and most importantly, how to defend one’s group against Indians. Despite Marcy’s attention to the issue of protecting the party from Indian attacks and thievery, the captain did address some of the cultural complexity of various Indian peoples, and he attempted to impart to his readers that “it is highly important to every man passing through a country frequented by Indians to know some of their habits, customs, and propensities, as this will facilitate his intercourse with friendly tribes...”⁵⁵ However, while describing the “wild tribes of the West” whose

⁵³ Farnham, *An 1839 Wagon Train Journal*, 7.

⁵⁴ Farnham, *An 1839 Wagon Train Journal*, 7.

⁵⁵ Marcy, *The Prairie Traveler*, 197, 213-19.

“attacks are made in the open prairies,” it is unlikely that Marcy’s readership was able to resist being negatively predisposed after reading that these Indians “do not, like the eastern Indians, inflict upon their prisoners prolonged tortures, but invariably subject all females that have the misfortune to fall into their merciless clutches to an ordeal worse than death.”⁵⁶

Captain Marcy was not content to leave his readers with a theoretical account of violence on the overland trail. *The Prairie Traveler* includes a reminiscence of an overland military exercise that Marcy undertook a decade before writing the guide. In 1849, near the headwaters of the Colorado River, Marcy laid sick in his tent and sent an officer out to perform a reconnoissance in his place. Marcy wrote that when the young officer abruptly met “four mounted Indians coming at full speed directly toward him,” “he deliberately rode up to them” instead of running away or “assuming a defensive attitude.”⁵⁷ Marcy asserted that the young officer was subsequently “brutally killed and scalped” by “a party of young Indians who were returning from an unsuccessful foray” and who were “unable to resist the temptation of taking the scalp and horse of the lieutenant.”⁵⁸ The moral of this tale, according to Marcy, was that “a small number of white men, in traveling upon the Plains, should not allow a party of strange Indians to approach them unless able to resist an attack under the most unfavorable circumstances.”⁵⁹ Marcy’s general warnings of sexual violence against emigrant women

⁵⁶ Marcy, *The Prairie Traveler*, 197.

⁵⁷ Marcy, *The Prairie Traveler*, 207.

⁵⁸ Marcy, *The Prairie Traveler*, 207.

⁵⁹ Marcy, *The Prairie Traveler*, 207.

and his anecdotal evidence of Indian hostilities could certainly have contributed to the anxieties of emigrants who were relying upon his guide before they ever encountered any Indians themselves.

Lansford Hasting's 1845 guidebook, *The Emigrants Guide to Oregon and California*, provided details of practical concerns for crossing through Indian territory that included the best routes (in this case, a proprietary route known as "Hastings Cutoff" that cut south of Salt Lake and shortened the trip for California emigrants), mileage between landmarks, supply lists, descriptions of the environments and resources emigrants would encounter, and a questionable, yet, remarkable account of being taken captive by a band of Sioux Indians.⁶⁰ Hastings described members of his party taking an outing on their 1842 overland journey near Fort Laramie to inscribe their names at the base of Independence Rock.⁶¹ "With drawn bows and guns," Hastings wrote, the seven Sioux Indians "rapidly advanced" toward the party, who scrambled down to where they had left their horses and firearms.⁶² The emigrants and Indians arrived at the horses at the same time, but the Americans were able to arm themselves, at which point the aggressors changed their demeanor and "extended their hands in friendship." The party reluctantly shook hands with the Indians and mounted their horses to make a quick departure. For reasons not stated in the account, the Indians then raised their weapons again, and a firefight broke out. Hastings claimed that his party killed at least five of the seven Indians

⁶⁰ Lansford Hastings addressed these topics in separate chapters that were designed to give their reader an easy reference guide by subject. See Lansford Hastings, *The Emigrant's Guide to Oregon and California* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1932)

⁶¹ Lansford Hastings, *The Emigrant's Guide to Oregon and California* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1932), 11-17.

⁶² Hastings, *The Emigrant's Guide to Oregon and California*, 12.

before fleeing over a ridge, where they “beheld the whole country, as far as we could see, completely covered with them, rapidly advancing towards us, with deafening whoops and terrific yells.”⁶³ Hastings and crew saw no choice but to give themselves up to the advancing entirety of the Sioux Nation and were subsequently “treated with the upmost rudeness” of being forced to sit on the ground without being permitted to change their position to “avoid danger or to acquire comfort.” The ensuing captivity narrative proceeds for five more pages, where some members of the Hastings party are singled out for violence, while Hastings was favored by an “old chief” who agreed to let the captives go and provided them with new horses in exchange for their old ones after Hastings convinced him that they could not be a war party because they had women and children with them back at the Fort.⁶⁴

The Hastings account is dubious for a few reasons. The first is that Independence Rock was a highly visited landmark for migrants around the Fort Laramie area, and no other scenarios as aggressive or dramatic as this were written about by other migrants. Independence Rock was in close proximity to Fort Laramie, which was an outpost frequented by soldiers, migrants, and Sioux peoples, so such a fantastic event would have made quite a stir. Another problem with this narrative is that a member of Hasting’s party, Medorem Crawford, disputed the events as described by Hastings. Crawford had made margin notes in his personal copy of the published guide that were then printed in a 1932 edition. In these notes, Crawford wrote that the “entire account of the capture” was

⁶³ Hastings, *The Emigrant’s Guide to Oregon and California*, 12.

⁶⁴ Hastings, *The Emigrant’s Guide to Oregon and California*, 14.

“greatly overdrawn and exaggerated.”⁶⁵ Yet, the most damning evidence against Hasting’s account is that it draws striking resemblances to the captivity narrative of Alexander Henry published in 1809. Henry was captured in Michigan in 1763 and ultimately gained the good graces of Wawatan, a native person of some distinction in the region.⁶⁶ The bond between Henry and an Indian in a position of power earned Henry his freedom (just as Hastings would do eighty years later), but it also kept Henry with one foot in two worlds—one Indian and one Anglo. Published captivity narratives like Henry’s were widely read throughout the nineteenth century, and given that Hasting’s captivity narrative followed a similar structure to Henry’s, it seems likely that Hasting’s account was an embellishment that became a part of the captivity narrative mythology.

Captivity narratives represent an important historical and literary tradition in North America. that recorded the ordeals of European colonists and early Americans being captured by Indians, and they likewise captured the attention and imagination of American readers. Yet, like guidebooks, captivity narratives tended to follow patterns that repeated themselves. In October 1754, Peter Williamson was awakened in the night by “the dismal war-cry, or war-whoop of the savages,” who ignored his impassioned pleas to stop and went about lighting his house on fire.⁶⁷ Williamson was then compelled to flee the building, at which point the Indians bound him to a tree, looted his house, and set fire

⁶⁵ For Medorem Crawford’s notes see Hastings, *The Emigrant’s Guide to Oregon and California*, xxv-xxvii. This particular note is number 12, on page xxvi.

⁶⁶ Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 328-329.

⁶⁷ Peter Williamson, *French and Indian Cruelty, Exemplified in the Life, and Various Vicissitudes of Fortune, of Peter Williamson,...* 7th ed., With Additions (Dublin, 1766), 15-16. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. University Of Oregon. <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=euge94201&tabID=T001&docId=CB127246890&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>, accessed March 29 2014.

to every building on his Pennsylvania farm. Williamson's captors led him on a forced march throughout the night, and at one point as they stopped to rest, held burning coals to his face and appendages to illustrate his fate if he should try and escape.⁶⁸ Williamson was captive for some time, traveling from Pennsylvania to northern New York. Along the way he witnessed at least two executions of other prisoners, usually at Indian villages.⁶⁹ He was then marched to Fort Oswego, where he was held by the British until the French attacked the fort in 1756.⁷⁰ Williamson was then put on a French ship bound for Quebec, where he stayed under duress for some time. The themes of this captivity narrative are prominent in many of the late-eighteenth century captivity narratives.

In October 1745, Nehemiah How left the security of the Great Meadow Fort (an outpost of Fort Dummer in Vermont) to chop wood when he heard a crashing sound behind him.⁷¹ Before he knew what had happened, How was surrounded and apprehended by a dozen or so Indians. The Indians marched How away from the fort for several days, telling him that "you must quick walk today, or I will kill you."⁷² After ten days among his Indian captors, Nehemiah was handed over to the French and boarded onto a schooner, which eventually landed him in Quebec where he was put into a French prison, where other captives of Indians were continuously delivered. In November 1745,

⁶⁸ Williamson, *French and Indian Cruelty*, 18.

⁶⁹ Williamson, *French and Indian Cruelty*, 30,46.

⁷⁰ Williamson, *French and Indian Cruelty*, 90.

⁷¹ Nehemiah How, *A Narrative of the Captivity of Nehemiah How, Who Was Taken By the Indians At the Great-Meadow Fort Above Fort-Dummer, Where He Was An Inhabitant, October 11th 1745...* (Boston: N.E., 1748), Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. University Of Oregon. <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=euge94201&tabID=T001&docId=CB127729775&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>, accessed March 29, 2014.

⁷² How, *A Narrative of the Captivity of Nehemiah How*, 5.

How began to document the conditions of the prison—a practice he continued until his death in May 1747 in a Quebec hospital, to which he had been transferred to shortly before his death.⁷³

In the following decade the Johnson family was homesteading near the Connecticut River in New England. During the night, a neighbor knocked on the door, and when Mr. Johnson answered it, he witnessed behind the unsuspecting neighbor “a crowd of savages, fixed horribly for war, rushed furiously in.”⁷⁴ Mr. Johnson was immediately captured. Mrs. Johnson, “in the last days of pregnancy,” and her three children were roused from the house into the main room, naked, and huddled together.⁷⁵ Before marching the family away from the home, the Indians provided Mrs. Johnson with a gown and the children with some clothing. As they began to march, Mrs. Johnson suffered a fainting spell, at which point her difficulty was “observed by an Indian” who “drew his knife, as I supposed, to put an end to my existence,” but instead he “cut some bands with which my gown was tied, and then pushed me on.”⁷⁶ Although Mrs. Johnson’s discomfort at having to trudge through the woods at night while late into her pregnancy was understandably difficult, it appears that her captors made every effort to minimize her discomfort. They supplied her with moccasins and the children with blankets, fed

⁷³ How, *A Narrative of the Captivity of Nehemiah How*, 23.

⁷⁴ Mrs. Johnson (Susannah Willard), *The Captive American; Or A Narrative of the Sufferings of Mrs. Johnson, During Four Years Captivity, With the Indians and French. Written By Herself*, 10. Carlisle, [1797]. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. University Of Oregon. <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=euge94201&tabID=T001&docId=CW101183978&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>, accessed March 29, 2014.

⁷⁵ Johnson (Susannah Willard), *The captive American; or a narrative of the sufferings of Mrs. Johnson*, 10.

⁷⁶ Johnson (Susannah Willard), *The captive American; or a narrative of the sufferings of Mrs. Johnson*, 11.

them three meals a day, and procured a pony for her to ride once they arrived at a village. When she gave birth to her daughter, whom she named Captive, she was allowed to rest for “the remainder of the day.”⁷⁷ Eventually, as with many other captives, the Johnsons were delivered to the French, who put them on a ship that transported them to Montreal, where the family was incarcerated in criminal jail. After six months, they were transferred to the civil jail in Quebec, where Mrs. Johnson and the children contracted small pox.⁷⁸ After recovering in the hospital, Mrs. Johnson and the children were released to return to their home. Mr. Johnson was released later and eventually died in battle in the service of the British Army. Despite all she had suffered, Mrs. Johnson reflected that “in justice to the Indians, I ought to remark, that they never treated me with cruelty to a wanton degree: few people have survived a situation like mine, and few have fallen into the hands of savages disposed to more lenity and patience.”⁷⁹

Many of these narratives speak to larger issues of Indians exploiting competing colonial powers in North America. Indian “captors” were used as procurers of British captives for the French in North America in the eighteenth century. The theme of Indians acting as prisoner brokers for the French inherently had a limited lifespan in North America as European and Indian national and colonial alliances shifted. Many of the captivity narratives were recorded in the mid-eighteenth century, when eastern Indian groups were better able to play off of competing French and British interests. Ironically, the stories became repeated, and therefore well-known, as the population and political

⁷⁷ Johnson (Susannah Willard), *The Captive American*, 16.

⁷⁸ Johnson (Susannah Willard), *The Captive American*, 54.

⁷⁹ Johnson (Susannah Willard), *The Captive American*, 40.

strength of the United States grew, rendering captivity by Indians to be an increasingly rare event. The ideas of Indian brutality that gripped the imagination of Americans who read captivity narratives were strongly entrenched in the collective consciousness despite Indian populations plummeting through the late nineteenth century.

The larger issues of dehumanizing Indians and promoting exaggerated stereotypes to which captivity narratives and guide books contributed had been present in American culture before the political entity of America was realized. Historian Richard Slotkin, in the first part of his trilogy on American myth-making, *Regeneration Through Violence*, argued that “the first colonists saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation; but the means to that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience.”⁸⁰ Slotkin argued that the vehicle through which American myth evolved was the printed literature that began with the Puritan bibles brought to New England. American mythology was then continuously reinforced through captivity narratives and popular fiction into the twentieth century. Slotkin described the prevalence of captivity narratives among the Puritan populations of seventeenth and eighteenth century New England as a “darkened and inverted mirror image of their own culture” in which “the preference for images of Indian cannibalism and rape reflects a growing Puritan belief that the only acceptable communion between Christian and Indian, civilization and wilderness, was the communion of murder, hunger, and bloodlust.”⁸¹ Slotkin was not looking directly at the effect of American mythology on

⁸⁰ Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, 5.

⁸¹ Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, 56, 125.

Indian and emigrant interactions along the overland trail, but his work established a compelling precedent for tracing the mythology of Indian savagery through captivity narratives and showed how the process of myth-making was *regenerative*—with violence acting as the driving metaphor. This framework is helpful in considering the ways in which North American culture informed the fears, ambitions, and anxieties of overland trail travelers. Importantly Slotkin made one statement that particularly applies to the extent that American mythology influenced interactions between Indians and emigrants on the overland trail. He warned his readers that “popularity alone is not the best sign by which to recognize the presence of a myth,” but that “more relevant is testimony to the power of the captivity narratives to express the community’s sense of meaning of its experience, to rationalize its actions , and to move its people to new actions.”⁸²

Nineteenth century emigrants rationalized their actions of expansion while utilizing guidebooks that moved them to new actions, which, if not openly hostile, were at least predicated on the notion that imagined that Indians were hostile until proven otherwise. The brief theoretical work by Italian scholar Lorenzo Veracini describes four forms of narrative transfer—a transfer of one population away from a territory so that it may be supplanted by another population.⁸³ Veracini did not specifically situate these forms in the nineteenth century American west, but three of the four of the narrative transfer forms are applicable. The first form of narrative transfer (I) in which “indigenous people are represented as hopelessly backward, as unchanging specimen of a primitive

⁸² Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, 96.

⁸³ Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 33.

form of humanity inhabiting pockets of past surrounded by contemporaneity” had been an operational understanding of Indian peoples from European view since contact, but this narrative was *particularly strong* west of the Missouri River during the mid-nineteenth century.⁸⁴ The second narrative transfer (II) occurred “when a ‘tide of history’ rationale is invoked to deny legitimacy to ongoing indigenous presences and grievances. This transfer focuses on “fatal impacts,” on indigenous discontinuity with the past, and typically expresses regret for the inevitable ‘vanishing’ of indigenous people.”⁸⁵ Emigrants frequently wrote of the decline of Indian peoples who lived on the plains and although the “vanishing Indian” trope reached a high point by the end of the nineteenth century, early versions of it can be found in the diaries of emigrants. In this way, trail diaries themselves contributed to, and reinforced the pervasiveness of the vanishing Indian narrative. The third relevant narrative transfer (IV) occurs “when ‘settlers are also indigenous peoples’ claims are made.”⁸⁶ American emigrants made such claims as soon as any territory fell under the umbrella of the United States at which point all past history was erased and American citizens were the rightful occupants who drove native people from their historic homes. In many ways, Veracini’s framework describes the history of European and American relations with Indians in North America at its most base level, but these narrative transfers were actively occurring during the overland trail migrations and were used as justification—even if unconsciously—for the expansion through Indian

⁸⁴ Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 41.

⁸⁵ Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 41.

⁸⁶ Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 42.

territories. In this way the process of overland migration was an expression of settler colonialism.

On the overland trail, though, emigrants were not concerned with or aware of the pervasive theoretical constructs that influenced their opinions of Indians. Instead, they relied on the written word of those that had come before them as truth. Trail guide books served emigrants by informing them of what to expect from their journey, but they also, like captivity narratives, were structured in a way that reinforced themes that denigrated all Indian people as treacherous savages. Lansford Hasting's story in *The Emigrant's Guide to Oregon and California* was influential in convincing migrants who followed the guide that the portion of the trail that crossed through Sioux territory was especially dangerous, despite migrants' personal experiences that were contrary to such a narrative. Pawnee and Sioux peoples most often fell victim to migrant assertions that theirs was a nation to be particularly feared.⁸⁷ In 1849 Joseph Buffum, only two weeks west of Independence, wrote that his party was now among the "wild Indians."⁸⁸ In that same year and at roughly the same location, emigrant Joseph Warren Wood wrote, seemingly without provocation, that "We are in the Pawnee country. They are a warlike tribe & have many warriors. They had better beware how they approach us in a warlike manner, for

⁸⁷ Pawnee peoples were often seen as the aggressors of Indian depredations on the plains according to emigrant journals. Sometimes the Sioux were referred to in much the same way, while many other times the Sioux were referred to as being friendly and hospitable, but often these descriptions were either written before the emigrant had encountered the particular Indian group, or the descriptions contradict the first-hand experiences that migrants had with Indian peoples. Because of the prevalence of captivity narratives and the relationship between Lansford Hasting's description of the Sioux and known captivity narratives, I believe that blanket statements in migrant journals that attempted to speak for the demeanor of Indian peoples that the emigrant may not have even yet encountered were a reflection of what they were reading in travel guides or pamphlets that treated Indian people as dangers of the trail.

⁸⁸ Joseph C Buffum, "The Diary of Joseph C. Buffum" May 14, 1849, FILM C-F 50 pt. II Reel 1:1-9, Western Americana Collection, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California.

the finger of many an emigrant itches to pull a trigger at their dusky forms.”⁸⁹ Within ten days of leaving Independence, Missouri, emigrant Merwin Kingsbury Hammond, upon entering Pawnee territory, commented in his journal that “they are a treacherous and thieving tribe.”⁹⁰ The following year, E.J. Goltra wrote in her 1853 journal that her party was “now in the Pawnee nation which is said to be the most troublesome tribe of Indians on this end of the trip.”⁹¹ Further west, near the Snake river, she wrote an entry that could have been informed from Marcy’s guidebook, or one like it, that “we are now among the most hostile tribe of Indians on the route, many emigrants have been killed here, there should not be less than 15 or 16 wagons together, we camped alone last night, but we kept a constant guard, we have not been troubled as yet.”⁹² S.B. Eakin, wrote after meeting a party of Indians around Fort Laramie (most likely Sioux) that “some of them traveled a few miles with us but they showed no signs of trouble but we kept a close watch on the treacherous beings.”⁹³

In 1863 Mrs. S.D. Evans described her trip from Nevada to a family farm in Oregon. The journey led her and her hired guide through a “wild and uninhabited country, where thieving, murderous Indians skulked ready to murder any unprotected

⁸⁹ Joseph Warren Wood, “Journal 1849,” May 23, 1849, A137, Folder 1, Accounts of Journeys to the Pacific Northwest, Special Collections, Knight Library, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

⁹⁰ Merwin Kingsbury Hammond, “Merwin Kingsbury Hammond Diaries,” May 9, 1852, BANC MSS 99/242 cz, Western Americana Collection, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California.

⁹¹ Elizabeth J. Goltra, “Elizabeth Goltra Papers,” May 10, 1853, A34, Folder 2, Accounts of Journeys to the Pacific Northwest, Special Collections, Knight Library, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

⁹² Goltra, “Elizabeth Goltra Papers,” August 31, 1853, Accounts of Journeys to the Pacific Northwest.

⁹³ S.B. Eakin. “A Short Sketch of a Trip ‘Across the Plains’,” June 2, 1866, AE 52, Accounts of Journeys to the Pacific Northwest, Special Collections, Knight Library, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

party they should fall in with.”⁹⁴ To be fair to Mrs. Evans, her husband had been killed by Indians two years earlier; however, her real life experience with Indian hostility only goes so far in answering the question of her expectations that such hostility would be encountered in the future. Mrs. Evans’ previous experience had little to do with the rest of her account, a scant seven pages, in which her guide’s instincts about anticipating an Indian attack were realized in a quick, bloody, and well-coordinated fire fight. After killing all of the Indians and saving Mrs. Evans, the guide “Whiskers” scalped the only Indian whose head (and scalp) was not destroyed by gunfire.⁹⁵ Rather than writing with disgust at her guide acting out the same savagery for which she denigrated Indians, Mrs. Evans’ account seems to fondly describe Whiskers’ decision to scalp their attackers as though it were natural—suggesting that to be able to fight Indians, whites had to become Indians. This reinforces Veracini’s narrative transfer (IV), which occurs when “settlers are also indigenous peoples,” only here there is no specific claim of indigeneity but rather a co-opting of behavior that anglos promoted as being Indian and savage, which further displaced Indians who could not compete with whites who were more savage (or Indian) than they were.

The language that emigrants used to describe Indians was a telling indication of how deeply entrenched their animosity toward Indian people was and how little it had to do with the actions of Indian groups on a large scale. Indians were commonly referred to as thieves and less frequently as murderers. The word treacherous is an interesting way to

⁹⁴ S.D. Evans, “A Trip From Washoe, Nevada, To Douglas County, Oregon in 1863,” CB Ev16, Accounts of Journeys to the Pacific Northwest, Special Collections, Knight Library, University of Oregon Eugene, Oregon, 1.

⁹⁵ Evans, “A Trip From Washoe, Nevada, To Douglas County, Oregon in 1863,” Accounts of Journeys to the Pacific Northwest, 5-6.

describe Indians, for it invokes some form of deceit or betrayal on behalf of Indians, which is ironic given the actual history of European and Indian peoples in North America. Slotkin's explanation for the use of adjectives that were not appropriate for Indian peoples being the result of a colonial projection of fears and guilt is compelling. Historian Jon T. Coleman asserted a similar argument as Slotkin but used European and American relationships with wolves as his framework. Coleman linked American wolf lore to European wolf lore, which had its roots in biblical references to wolves.⁹⁶ This precedent to treat wolves as creatures who steal away members of a fold was reflected through Puritan rhetoric where church members were shepherds and Indians were "wolves dressed in sheep's clothing"—language that is indicative of treachery.⁹⁷ A more alarming theme among Puritans was the tendency to view Indians as actual wolves, as a way of dehumanizing them. Coleman explored the writings of missionaries in New England and remarked that "English men and women spoke and sang in tones of 'elation and joy,' while Indians bellowed like animals."⁹⁸ Another missionary asserted that Indians "act like wolves and are to be dealt withal as wolves."⁹⁹ Whether or not early colonists in North America were mirroring their own fears or guilt, the effect on Indian people who suffered from the results of such rhetoric was very real and continued to disseminate through public consciousness as European ethos transitioned to American ethos.

⁹⁶ Jon T. Coleman, *Vicious: Wolves and Men in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 41.

⁹⁷ Coleman, *Vicious*, 41.

⁹⁸ Coleman, *Vicious*, 43.

⁹⁹ Coleman, *Vicious*, 43.

Two centuries later it was easy for emigrants to accept Puritan ideas as natural. While there is no shortage of emigrant writings that denigrated particular Indian peoples, it is likely that they were repeating what they either heard from other emigrants on the trail or what they read in guide books. Although the bulk of Thomas Farnham's diary follows a narrative structure that recorded his experiences on the trail, portions of it acted as an encyclopedia of Indian peoples, most of whom were denigrated and vilified. Farnham wrote that the Paiutes were "the most degraded and least intellectual Indians known to the trappers," they "eat roots, lizards and snails," and their "heads are white with the germs of crawling filth!"¹⁰⁰ The Crows were characterized as people whom were known to be untrustworthy by local traders and that "murder and robbery are their principal employments."¹⁰¹ Farnham described "Snake Root Diggers" (most likely Western Shoshone) as "more filthy than the Hottentots" who "eat the vermin from each other's heads!"¹⁰² Although Farnham does go on at some length about these claims, there is little to indicate that they reflect any amount of time spent in contact with the people whom he reviles. Emigrant statements about Pawnee, Sioux, or Shoshone deficiencies were often similarly asserted in a vacuum of cultural context.

Captivity narratives, ingrained in the public consciousness and reinforced through guidebooks and literature in the nineteenth century, were largely responsible for a migrant population setting out across the plains with an expectation that they would encounter Indian people who were hostile. Given the vivid rhetoric of violence—Indians raping

¹⁰⁰ Farnham, *An 1839 Wagon Train Journal*, 55.

¹⁰¹ Farnham, *An 1839 Wagon Train Journal*, 59.

¹⁰² Farnham, *An 1839 Wagon Train Journal*, 71-72.

women and capturing children—which was common in both captivity narratives and trail guide books, we cannot blame emigrants for being anxious. Yet, as Joseph Warren Wood’s journal reminds us, emigrants were more than eager to counter the imagined hostility of plains Indians with very real acts of violence. The collective anti-Indian culture reflected through captivity narratives and guidebooks had real life consequences for Indian people across North America that was continuously reinforced throughout the nineteenth century.

CHAPTER III

ONTO THE PLAINS: INDIAN AND EMIGRANT INTERACTIONS

AT THE BEGINNING OF THE OVERLAND TRAIL

Sarah Sutton and her family were only nine days out of St. Joseph, Missouri, when they first encountered Indians. "Here three Indians came to see us," she wrote in her 1854 diary. "They were a great curiosity. Our boys put up a hat for [him] to shoot at with his bow and arrow and he hit the mark; they gave him the hat, he put it on his head and walked off."¹ This was not the menacing Indian that plagued the writings of so many emigrants who were anxious about their encounters with Indians. Sutton's Indian, instead, has an almost John Wayne cowboy quality about him that makes it acceptable for him to use his weapon in front of children and walk off with their belongings without being perceived as a threat. Such a personal characterization of an Indian as an individual is not easy to come by in the diaries left by emigrants along the overland trail. Instead, emigrants continued to denigrate Indians in their trail diaries despite having overwhelmingly positive interactions with Indian peoples.

Across the span of the Plains, from the jumping off places in Missouri to the seemingly imperceptible rise of the Rocky Mountains at the South Pass, which nearly marked the halfway point, emigrants encountered Indians on a regular basis.² To be sure,

¹ Sarah Sutton, "1854 Travel Diary," April 4, 1854, BANC MSS 2005/1 p. Western Americana Collection, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California.

² A table in the end of Hosea Horn's guidebook designated the South Pass as 823 miles west of Council Bluffs. See Hosea B. Horn, *Horn's Overland Guide, From the U.S. Indian Sub-Agency, Council Bluffs, on the Missouri River, to the City of Sacramento, in California*. (New York: J.H. Colton, 1852), 28.

some of those encounters went sour.³ Given the fears that migrants were expressing in their journals, it seems inevitable that violence would have erupted from the skittish population of travelers. That emigrants were far more dangerous toward Indians than the other way around is not shocking. What is shocking is that more Indians were not harmed by anxious emigrants.⁴ Yet, instead of a threat, most Indians represented a trading partner, who offered crucially valuable goods or services to emigrants. These encounters were not glamorous or exciting, yet there are numerous records of them. Scholars have found little in the way of violence attributed to Indians and have worked hard to debunk the myth that Indians were violently preying on settlers headed out west. While historians have written about encounters between American emigrants and Indians on the overland trail, these examinations have underemphasized how common amicable interactions between Indians and emigrants were. There is an implication that the low numbers of violent encounters equate to infrequent contact. In this way the focus on violence, given how little there was, misses a very important point: that Indians were everywhere along the trail.

Emigrants often encountered Indian people within days of leaving the borders of the United States. Nine days after leaving the banks of the Missouri River, Joel Palmer, who would go on to be one of the first Indian agents in Oregon, lost some livestock that were reported to have been taken by local Indians. The next day Palmer and his company

³ John D. Unruh argued that of the “nearly 400 overlanders” who were killed between 1840 and 1860, “approximately 90 percent of all emigrant killings took place west of South Pass.” This leaves approximately forty emigrants killed from Missouri to the South Pass over a twenty year period, or an average of one emigrant killed by Indians every two years of the overland migrations. See Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 185.

⁴ Notably, John D. Unruh compiled expansive data that he charted which show that Indians were most often on the receiving end of violence. See charts on page 185 of *The Plains Across*.

sought to recover the stock at a Kansa Indian village. While their search turned up empty, the party was given a warm welcome when “the chiefs came forward, greeted our party kindly, and by signs offered to smoke the pipe of peace.”⁵ Within days of starting out on the trail in 1849, Vincent Geiger and Wakeman Bryarly “visited several Indian lodges belonging to the Iowas & met a Chief of that tribe who was one of the noblest looking men I ever saw.” During the same visit the “Sacs presented a bill for wood,” which the men paid without delay.⁶ These early encounters occurred almost immediately after emigrants had left the political boundary of the United States and were representative of the innocuous nature of Indian and emigrant interactions that were contrary to the anxieties that emigrants had expressed in their journals.

Despite experiencing positive interactions with Indians at the start of the trail, emigrants were particularly concerned about traveling through the territories belonging to the Pawnee and Sioux nations. Yet, for many emigrants, the reality of interactions among the Pawnees and Sioux contradicted the expectations that had come to accept as veracious. Emigrant Tipton Lindsey wrote of exchanges with the Pawnees and Sioux peoples during his journey west in 1849. In mid-May, Tipton’s party reached a large Pawnee village that was “entirely vacated,” which Tipton attributed to “its inhabitants being driven to the woods by their incourageable [sic] enemies the ‘Sioux’.”⁷ Throughout

⁵ Joel Palmer, *Journal of Travels: Over the Oregon Trail in 1845* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1993), 41.

⁶ Vincent Geiger and Wakeman Bryarly, *Trail to California: The Overland Journal of Vincent Geiger & Wakeman Bryarly*, Edited by David M. Potter (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 78.

⁷ Tipton Lindsey, “The Plains and Deserts of North America: A Journal of a Trip To California (Overland) by Tipton Lindsey, 1849,” May 18, 1849, BANC MSS C-F 62, Western Americana Collection, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California.

the day they encountered “some 12 Pawnees,” and that evening “an Indian came into camp badly wounded—he was a pitiful object—almost destitute of clothing & in a feverish & famished condition—we treated him as a neighbor.”⁸ The next evening some 84 Sioux “warriors” came into camp, supposedly on the trail of the Pawnee village refugees, whom Tipton described as being “friendly,” “well-proportioned,” and “noble looking” and who stayed to trade with the emigrant party before continuing on the following morning.⁹ Tipton’s encounter with Pawnees and Sioux in such close proximity is interesting in that it demonstrates how capricious inter-Indian conflicts could be—an issue most often remarked upon in emigrant journals as it related to conflicts between Sioux and Pawnee—and because it further demonstrates that statements about Pawnee or Sioux peoples being the “most feared” on the plains were unwarranted.

Emigrants’ actual encounters with both Pawnee and Sioux peoples were usually far more amicable than expected. In his famous 1846 memoir, Francis Parkman, who described the Pawnee as “treacherous, cowardly banditti,” had an “amicable conference with the chief” of a large Pawnee hunting party, who had not seemed concerned with Parkman before he enticed them to come into his camp and presented him “with a half a pound of tobacco, at which unmerited bounty he expressed much gratitude.”¹⁰ Emigrant Aylett Rains Cotton appeared to heed Captain Randolph B. Marcy’s advice about not letting Indians getting too close when he described an encounter with some Pawnee in 1849, writing “We never allowed any Indians approach near us, although the Indian, all

⁸ Lindsey, “The Plains and Deserts of North America,” May 18, 1849, Western Americana Collection.

⁹ Lindsey, “The Plains and Deserts of North America,” May 19, 1849, Western Americana Collection.

¹⁰ Francis Parkman, *The Oregon Trail*, edited by Mason Wade (Norwalk: Heritage Press, 1971), 53, 56.

the way up the Platt [sic] seemed very friendly.”¹¹ Joseph Warren Wood, who had earlier threatened to shoot at the “dusky forms” of the Pawnee who might molest emigrants, testified in his 1849 diary that a group of Sioux Indians who camped near the emigrant party “appeared friendly” and that as a group they were “peacably [sic] disposed towards the whites.”¹² Emigrant John Benson and party had heard rumors of Indian attacks throughout Pawnee territory, only to have the allegations that “five men had been killed and forty wagons burned” and another “fifteen wagons had been burned and the men taken prisoners” were disputed by soldiers three days later who declared that the local Indians were “peaceful and no danger or difficulty with them.”¹³ When Benson and his party encountered Indians (who were likely Sioux) for the first time near Fort Laramie, he described them as “bright, fine looking fellows, very friendly, shaking hands with all they met.”¹⁴ While hostile interactions were not unknown, the type of interactions explored here are more representative of what happened when emigrants encountered Indian groups that were rumored to be more dangerous than nations known to be friendly to whites.

Encounters early on the overland trail set a precedent for a practice that many migrants would participate in: the sharing of food with Indians. A week into their

¹¹ Aylett Rains Cotton, “Across the Plains to California in 1849 and After,” BANC MSS 73/122 c:76, Western Americana Collection, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California, 21.

¹² Joseph Warren Wood, “Journal 1849,” June 6, 1849, June 2, 1849, A137, Folder 1, Accounts of Journeys to the Pacific Northwest, Special Collections, Knight Library, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

¹³ John H. Benson, “From St. Joseph to Sacramento By a Forty Niner,” May 21, 1849, May 24, 1849, FILM C-F 50 pt. II Reel 1:1-9, Western Americana Collection, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California.

¹⁴ Benson, “From St. Joseph to Sacramento By a Forty Niner,” June 5, 1849, Western Americana Collection.

journey, Geiger and Bryarly wrote of an encounter with an Iowa Indian family who were traveling along the trail, and whom the migrants fed, for which the family “seemed to be thankful.”¹⁵ Mary Ann Boatman described an encounter in which her party was startled by “the sound of horses heavy trod” into their camp.¹⁶ As a party of Indians rode upon their encampment, the emigrants, having been made anxious by recent reports of Indian depredations upon migrants, dove under wagons and ran to retrieve their firearms.¹⁷ The party quickly realized that they had misunderstood the intentions of their visitors, as the incoming party was “only a dozen or more friendly Indians who chanced to be passing by and stopped to beg something to eat.”¹⁸ After a brief exchange where one of the Indian men gestured to the party’s cooking utensils, and then to his mouth, “something for them to eat was hurried,” and the Indians rode away.¹⁹ Five days after setting out on the trail, E.J. Goltra and company “Met some Indians on the road, the first we have seen on the plains,” and proceeded to give them “some bread and meat and a dime, they thanked us and passed on.”²⁰ Sarah Sutton, whose boys had given an Indian a hat in exchange for his marksmanship with a bow and arrow, described incidents along the Platte river where she

¹⁵ Vincent Geiger and Wakeman Bryarly, *Trail to California: The Overland Journal of Vincent Geiger & Wakeman Bryarly*, ed., David M. Potter (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 79.

¹⁶ Mary Ann Boatman’s journal was edited, annotated, and printed by Weldon Willis Rau in *Surviving the Oregon Trail: 1852*.

¹⁷ Mary Ann and Willis Boatman, *Surviving the Oregon Trail, 1852: As Told by Mary Ann and Willis Boatman and Augmented with Accounts by other Overland Travelers*, ed., Weldon Willis Rau (Pullman: Washing State University Press, 2001), 35.

¹⁸ Boatman, *Surviving the Oregon Trail*, 35.

¹⁹ Boatman, *Surviving the Oregon Trail*, 35.

²⁰ Goltra, “Elizabeth Goltra Papers,” May 5, 1853, *Journeys to the Pacific Northwest*.

fed friendly and humble Indian people who were grateful for a meal. In her diary entry of 24 May 1854, Sutton

wrote that her party had been “highly honored today by five Sioux visitors. They came up and shook hands with us and looked very innocent. We gave them something to eat and they appeared well pleased.” Two days later, Sutton chided fellow emigrants’ views of Indians and wrote that the Sioux were “innocent, harmless and won't touch a thing that don't belong to them; all they want is something to eat.”²¹ On the Plains portion of the overland trail, exchanges of food were often a one-way transaction with emigrants feeding Indians. Once emigrants crossed the continental divide and entered the second half of the journey, the circumstances were often reversed—with Indians providing foodstuff to hungry emigrants for a price.

Although emigrants many times fed Indians in need of a meal, Indians helped emigrants in other ways. Michael Tate argued in *Indians and Emigrants* that “the ultimate contribution of American Indians to the history of the overland trails came in the form of saving lives.”²² Tate goes on to describe two scenarios in which emigrants lost their way and were redirected towards the safety of their camp by local Indians.²³ While these interactions did possibly save the lives of the emigrants in question, within the framework of Tate’s argument it appears that Indians “saving lives” was their “ultimate contribution to the history of the overland trails.” While Indians were often employed as trail guides by both military and emigrant parties, emigrants rarely expressed gratitude for Indians’

²¹ Sutton, “1854 Travel Diary,” May 26, 1854, Western Americana Collection.

²² Michael L. Tate, *Indians and Emigrants: Encounters on the Overland Trails* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), 76.

²³ Tate, *Indians and Emigrants*, 76-77.

service. Instead emigrants assumed that Indian guides would keep them safe as part of their duties.

There were, certainly, incidents in which Indians risked their own lives to save emigrants. Weldon Willis Rau described a scene, recorded by Enoch W. Conyers in 1852, in which a ferry capsized while crossing the Missouri River, trapping a young man and his sister inside of it. The young man was able to free himself from the overturned and partially-submerged wreckage as emigrants watched from shore. Conyers wrote that the man “immediately turned his attention to the condition of his sister and soon brought her alive to the surface.” Indians on the banks “witnessed the accident, and seeing the perilous condition of the young man and his sister, plunged into the stream, swam out to them and brought them both safely to shore.”²⁴ These kinds of interactions were more sensational than were the many more mundane interactions in which Indian people helped emigrants in other ways. There is no evidence that Indians risked their lives for emigrants in significant numbers during the overland trail migrations.

Indians’ largest contribution to the history of the overland trail was the myriad of support services that they offered emigrants. When Plains Indian peoples were not engaged in their own political or cultural disputes, they often offered support services to emigrant parties in need. In *The Plains Across*, John Unruh explored several of the prominent ways in which Indians lent their employ to overlanders, mainly as ferry operators, guides, and livestock wranglers.²⁵ Ferries were operated by about every group

²⁴ Boatman, *Surviving the Oregon Trail*, 27-28.

²⁵ John D. Unruh, *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 156-160.

of people who lived between Missouri and the West Coast. Ferries were so numerous on the Missouri River that John Unruh referred to ferry service as “virtually limitless,” with each proprietor vying for customers by advertising their services as being superior to their competitors’ services.²⁶ The Papin ferry, owned by brothers Joseph and Louis, was one of the more well-known services that crossed the Kansas river just west of Independence.²⁷ Charles Fish, a Shawnee man, operated an even more popular ferry near the Papin. Fish’s ferry was a two-boat operation that competed with both Papin and another Shawnee-run ferry run by a man named Toley.²⁸ Some Sioux Indians near Fort Laramie operated small-scale ferry services where they would swim livestock back and forth across water crossings.²⁹

Indians offered help and services to emigrants in other vital ways. In 1849 Amos P. Josselyn and his party lost some livestock on the plains, presumably to Indians. Amos spent the night on the plains looking for his lost mules only to return the next morning to find that his mules had been returned to camp by “Indians who said they caught some Indians of another tribe driving them off. They wanted \$9 for returning them but took five.”³⁰ Josselyn’s experience highlights a critical component of incidents in which Indians appeared to help emigrants: that they often did so as part of an exchange. Some of these services were performed without a request for compensation, which may have

²⁶ Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 267.

²⁷ Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 247.

²⁸ Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 252.

²⁹ Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 157.

³⁰ Amos P. Josselyn, “Journal of Amos P. Josselyn: April 2, 1849 to Sept. 11, 1849 - Zanesville, Ohio, to Sacramento Valley,” FILM C-F 50 pt. II Reel 1:1-9, Western Americana Collection, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California.

been interpreted by emigrants that the service was provided without a fee. Compensation for these services could take many forms: an unspoken expectation for an unspecified gift of relatively equal value, a set and stated request for specific payment, or a mutually agreed upon trade of goods and services were all likely outcomes that frequently occurred. What was considered “help” by one group was sometimes considered “trade” by another group—a fundamental misunderstanding that caused the unexpected hostilities that sometimes quickly arose out of Indian and emigrant interactions.

Most interactions between Indians and emigrants on the overland trail revolved in some way around trading of goods and services. Mutually beneficial trade between Indians and emigrants took many forms along the trail. They rarely involved cash transactions, and both parties traded those they saw as abundant items for more scarce items.³¹ Trade between Indians and emigrants differed between the Plains and the section of the trail west of the Continental Divide. Trade on the plains tended to involve emigrants exchanging food for Indian wares, and trade in the western-most portion of the trail tended to involve Indians bartering food for manufactured goods.³² Trade between Indians and emigrants, more so than inter-Indian trade, was a self-imposed system of dependence. European or American produced goods such as fishhooks, metal pots, tools, or guns enabled Indians to produce more trade goods to acquire these items while a

³¹ Tate, *Indians and Emigrants*, 52.

³² Tate, *Indians and Emigrants*, 45-46.

steady stream of emigrant customers created a steady demand for Indian-produced goods.³³

One of the more common trading scenarios occurred at semi-permanent outposts that served as neutral meeting grounds for people from different cultural identities.³⁴ Migrant Joseph C. Buffum vividly described one such outpost in a manner that was consistent with many overland trail diary accounts. In 1849 Buffum and his party encountered a trading post at Ash Hollow populated by “French and half-breed traders with their Indian squaws and children.”³⁵ Five days later, John Benson stopped at the same trading post and described in his journal “some traders living with the Indians” who had six huts and “white wolves trained for dogs.”³⁶ Many emigrants referred to traders as being “French.” By the nineteenth century there was already a rich history of French trappers who integrated into Indian (particularly Cheyenne) families by marrying Indian women on the plains.³⁷ Farther north, along the trail route, the Robidoux family trading post near Scott’s Bluff was owned and operated by two brothers and included a store, two

³³ Elliott West discussed the usefulness of European goods to Indians in *The Contested Plains*, 46-48, while Michael Tate discussed the importance of moccasins and bison robes to emigrants in *Indians and Emigrants*, 43-44.

³⁴ John Unruh mapped major trading posts along the trail routes. Map 5 shows trading posts for 1840-1848, 246. Map 6 shows trading posts for 1849, 258. Map 7 shows trading posts for 1850, 269. These maps show that the number of trading posts increased along the Oregon route of the trail from 8 in the first map, to 10 in 1849 and 15 in 1850. These trading posts were an oft-mentioned detail of the trail that emigrants wrote about in their journals.

³⁵ Joseph C Buffum, “The Diary of Joseph C. Buffum” June 3, 1849, FILM C-F 50 pt. II Reel 1:1-9, Western Americana Collection, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California.

³⁶ Benson, “From St. Joseph to Sacramento By a Forty Niner,” June 8, 1849, Western Americana Collection.

³⁷ Elliott West discussed the issue of trade marriages between the Cheyenne and (mostly) French trappers turned traders after the decline of beaver stocks in the 1820s in *The Contested Plains*, 80-81.

blacksmith shops and several Indian “wigwams,” likely occupied by Sioux Indians given the location of the trading post in the near vicinity of Fort Laramie.³⁸

Joseph Buffum described the people he saw living at the trading outpost, their dwellings, and their commodities produced by the family. Buffum wrote that “the young Indian girls were neatly dressed in deerskin frocks and beautiful moccasins” and were “very busy making moccasins for the emigrants which they exchange in trade with them.” Several trail diaries mention the trade in moccasins, but Buffum’s account is significant as few migrants wrote of seeing a family producing these trade goods. Buffum also described the housing structures, which he referred to as “lodges,” which were “like a round tent and covered with dressed buffalo hides. A hole is left at top to serve as a chimney and the fire is built in the middle of the lodge.” Buffum, like so many emigrant authors, was most likely trying to draw a mental picture to share with those back home.

Trade interactions between emigrants and Native people often took place at trading posts like the one described by Joseph Buffum and John Benson, but there were other common spaces where trade exchanges took place.³⁹ Emigrants and Indians traded wares—particularly bison robes and moccasins—in exchange for food or goods as they moved along the trail itself.⁴⁰ Usually this kind of exchange was limited to small groups or individuals. Vincent Geiger and Wakeman Bryarly, for instance, traded with a party of Sioux Indians along the trail, exchanging clothing for moccasins.⁴¹ Tipton Lindsey traded

³⁸ Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 270.

³⁹ Descriptions, although not as detailed as Buffum’s, of trading posts (or small villages) belonging to Indian, French, or some combination of the two, were common in emigrant diaries.

⁴⁰ Tate, *Indians and Emigrants*, 42-43.

⁴¹ Geiger and Bryarly, *Trail to California*, 97.

some rations for moccasins with the Sioux war party he encountered on the trail in 1849.⁴² Forts, on the other hand, served as trade centers, resupply stations, and gathering places for travelers and local Indians.⁴³ Jane Eakin wrote of her father acquiring two buffalo robes in the vicinity of Fort Laramie in 1866.⁴⁴ Others, like Sarah Sutton, visited the semi-permanent trading centers that were established just outside of the fortified walls of military outposts.⁴⁵ Esther Belle Hannan, in 1852, recorded in her diary that her party "Came to a trading place this afternoon & an Indian encampment, they have moccasins, skins, & other articles to trade." "They make," she continued, "a great many moccasins & other fancy articles worked with beads, some of them very handsome. We bought a pair apiece of them. Passed another trading point after noon and then came on until within a mile of the Fort where we have encamped within three or four rods of an Indian encampment & blacksmith shop."⁴⁶

Indians and emigrants both benefitted from trade along the overland route. In many cases, Indians acquired a meal for next to no cost. In other cases, emigrants accepted small keepsakes in exchange for food. As migrants moved west, trade became increasingly more important, and more costly. Emigrants' livestock went into serious decline west of the Rocky mountains, often the result of a summer spent in the high

⁴² Lindsey, "The Plains & Deserts of north America", May 19, 1849, Western Americana Collection.

⁴³ John Unruh discussed the importance of forts in the fur trade, and later in the overland migrations in *Across the Plains*, 244-46.

⁴⁴ Jane Eakin, "Diary of Her Family's Journey Across the Plains in 1866," June 9, 1866, Journeys to the Pacific Northwest.

⁴⁵ Sutton, "1854 Travel Diary," May 25, 1854, Western Americana Collection.

⁴⁶ Esther Belle Hannah, "Diary," June 12, 1852, BANC MSS P-A 313, Western Americana Collection, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California.

country and on the plains where grass became increasingly scarce. This decline opened an opportunity for Indians to trade in horses and livestock, buying tired animals at a discount and selling fresh animals at a premium. The farther west that emigrants traveled their impact on the natural resources and the lives of indigenous people was less immediately apparent but was met with quick reactions from Native people. On the plains, the damage that overland migrations caused to the landscape of Indian territory, the ecology of the plains, and the ability of Indian peoples to maintain control over their lives and livelihood as they had previously known them was an ongoing process that played out less noticeably on the ground than at the end of the route.

Perhaps most disruptive was the largely unintentional exchange of European diseases carried by overland emigrants.⁴⁷ Americans also suffered from diseases during the overland migrations—particularly cholera. In May 1849 a member Joseph Buffum’s party was stricken with cholera near Independence, which Buffum noted was “racked” by the disease.⁴⁸ In July of the same year a member of Aylett Rains Cotton’s party contracted cholera at Fort Laramie and died the next day.⁴⁹ A member of Esther Belle Hannah’s 1852 party came down with what she described as “something resembling cholera,” of which he died five days later.⁵⁰ Cholera was not the only contagious disease that followed emigrants on the trail. Shortly after leaving Independence, John Benson passed

⁴⁷ Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 395.

⁴⁸ Buffum, “The Diary of Joseph C. Buffum” May 1, 1849, Western Americana Collection.

⁴⁹ Cotton, “Across the Plains to California in 1849 and After,” 23.

⁵⁰ Esther Belle Hannah, “Diary,” June 21, 1852, Western Americana Collection.

encampments where one “had the cholera and smallpox” and “another had the measles.”⁵¹

While these diseases were disastrous for emigrants, they decimated Indian populations and the mere mention of disease was enough to provoke strong reactions from Native people. P.F. Castleman, after having lost a member of his party to cholera and dodging the disease that stopped several wagon trains on the plains, encountered an abandoned Indian settlement along the Platte River that he identified as Sioux. After discovering a few human remains partially wrapped in blankets inside of a dwelling, Castleman noted in his journal that “it may be possible that those persons died with cholera and this is their property as they leave everything with the dead and fearing that the disease was contagious they left them in their wigwam.”⁵² One incident involved an emigrant using Sioux fears of smallpox as a deterrent to committing depredations against an emigrant party. In this case, related in William Case’s emigrant journal, the chief trader at Fort Platte (near Fort Laramie) had noticed a group of young Sioux men who had been overheard plotting depredations against an incoming party before the trader told them the train had experienced a smallpox death. His implication that more party members could be affected—which caused the Sioux to abandon their plans for fear of coming into contact with the disease.⁵³ Sometimes though, Indians reacted more strongly to disease than just vacating the area. One incident reported in the *Liberty Weekly*

⁵¹ Benson, “From St. Joseph to Sacramento By a Forty Niner,” May 21, 1849, May 20, 1849, Western Americana Collection.

⁵² P.F. Castleman, “Diary By P.F. Castleman: While Crossing the Plains to California Commencing From the Time He Left St. Joseph, Mo.,” June 16, 1849, FILM C-F 50 Pt. I Reel 2:11-16, Western Americana Collection, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California.

⁵³ Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 250.

Tribune (published in Liberty, Missouri) in 1849 involved a young Cheyenne man whose wife, mother, father, and brother had all died of cholera. After vowing to “kill the first white man he encountered,” the Cheyenne man made good on his word and took retribution by killing a trail migrant.⁵⁴

Aside from the spread of disease, with trade occurring frequently and for the most part amicably, how can we understand the points at which that mutual amicability deteriorated? As this study previously explored, emigrants’ preoccupation with violence bordered on obsession. It was traumatic for any person who experienced actual violence on the trail, but the expectation of Indian violence that was reinforced through the rhetoric of American culture had devastating effects on Indian populations. While emigrants saw relations break down over perceived thieving and treachery committed by Indians, in truth emigrants’ expectations of violent encounters caused relations to suffer on the trail. At the same time that trade relations contradicted emigrants’ expectations of encountering hostile Indians, emigrants asserted settler colonialism claims, consciously and unconsciously, by damaging the landscape and over-using resources that they considered theirs for the taking. In short, their mere presence—the act of emigrating across the plains—damaged and sometimes destroyed the landscape.

Emigrants exacerbated environmental damage already well underway by the mid-nineteenth century. In tracing the effects of gold rush migration into Colorado along several trails that ran parallel to the overland trail which ran through Kansas, historian Elliott West explored environmental issues in the nineteenth century that would have

⁵⁴ Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 188.

reverberating effects across the plains as a whole. Plains-dwelling horse cultures grazed animals on the Plains for over a century before the overland migrations of the 1840s-‘60s.⁵⁵ A series of droughts from the 1840s through 1860s further worsened conditions on the plains.⁵⁶ Although each of these environmental conditions individually posed unique challenges for Indian peoples on the plains, when combined together they cascaded into the potential for disaster. This disaster was realized through the process of overland migration as “more than 300,000 persons and at least 1.5 million oxen, cattle, horses, and sheep” moved west across the plains and devoured the grasslands.⁵⁷

Emigrants used resources that plains Indian peoples depended upon for survival. While the presence or absence of grass and timber were the most oft-mentioned subjects in emigrant journals, emigrants rarely recorded that their use of these increasingly scarce resources affected Indian peoples. The strain on plains resources was twofold: emigrants hunted antelope and small game—and the wood to fuel their fires— to feed themselves, and their livestock ate plains grasses which left less fodder for bison and antelope that Indian peoples depended on.⁵⁸ As previously mentioned, the 1846 Kansa treaty addressed Indian concerns about having lands set aside for their residence that were devoid of timber after half a decade of overland emigration through the area.⁵⁹ Yet, despite those treaty stipulations local Indians looked to American emigrants to help compensate for the

⁵⁵ Elliott West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998), 86-88.

⁵⁶ West, *The Contested Plains*, 89-91.

⁵⁷ West, *The Contested Plains*, 88-89.

⁵⁸ Tate, *Indians and Emigrants*, 44-45.

⁵⁹ Kappler, ed., *Indian Treaties*, 553.

degradation of resources on the land. Emigrant P.F. Castleman encountered an Indian toll at Wolf Creek, where the proprietors demanded payment for emigrants “burning all their wood and that our animals were eating all the grass,” for which the emigrants paid two bits per wagon.⁶⁰ Reports of tolls that sought compensation for such resources were not common topics in emigrant diaries, but a few do exist. A more common scenario involved emigrant parties disrupting game herds.

A common sentiment that plains Indians expressed throughout the nineteenth century was that Americans—specifically white men—interfered with their ability to hunt game, particularly bison. Elliott West described a statement given to an Indian agent by a Lakota member who saw “white men everywhere” and complained that “Their rifles kill some of the game, & the smoke of their Camp fires scares the rest away.”⁶¹ Joel Palmer, on his journey to Oregon, had dinner with some Sioux Indians near Fort Laramie who expressed their concern about emigrants disrupting hunting opportunities on the plains. One man, through an interpreter, told Palmer that “Before the white man came, the game was tame, and easily caught, with the bow and arrow. Now the white man has frightened it” and that in order to procure game “the red man needed long guns.”⁶² Castleman’s interaction with Indians on the border or Pawnee country and Palmer’s exchange with the Sioux were emblematic of the ways in which emigration compounded and amplified existing issues.

⁶⁰ Castleman, “Diary By P.F. Castleman,” May 23, 1849, Western Americana Collection.

⁶¹ Elliott West, *The Way to the West: Essays on the Central Plains* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 54.

⁶² Joel Palmer, *Journal of Travels: Over the Oregon Trail in 1845* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1993), 57-58.

Although emigrants often recognized that they were moving through Indian territories on the trail, they just as often asserted ideological ownership over the land by defacing natural landmarks. Overlanders gathered at specific places to etch their names in sandstone or paint it on granite. To date, over three thousand names have been collected from sites along the trail.⁶³ One of the more well-known places is called Register Cliff, which lies along the Platte River in present-day Wyoming. The “cliff” soars above the riverbed by as much as a hundred feet at its highest point. The face of the cliff has been defaced with hundreds of carvings, some simple and small, some intricate and substantial, most of which were left by passers-by on their way to the West. Another popular spot was Independence Rock, due west from Register Cliff along the Platte River in Wyoming. Here, emigrants both carved and painted their names in the solid granite face.⁶⁴ In 1845, Joel Palmer described visiting this famous landmark which he described as a “solitary pile of gray granite, standing in an open plain” upon which were “covered with inscriptions of the names of travelers, with the dates of their arrival—some carved, some in black paint, and others in red.”⁶⁵ Tipton Lindsey, in 1849, described the same landmark as being a “solid granite of extraordinary size,” which had “names carved and painted thereon.”⁶⁶ For some emigrants, carving their names in stone with a hammer and

⁶³ Amateur Historian Charles Kelly compiled over 3,000 names in a printed volume entitled *The Emigrant Register*, housed at the Bancroft Library. The register details names from over a dozen sites along the overland routes, but is by no means an exhaustive list. Charles Kelly, “Emigrant Register: Names and Dates Found Along the Old Emigrant Trails,” BANC MSS P-W 7, Western Americana Collection, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California.

⁶⁴ Keith Heyer Meldahl, *Hard Road West: History and Geology Along the Gold Rush Trail* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), Fig 6.2 & 6.3, 96-99.

⁶⁵ Palmer, *Journal of Travels*, 67.

⁶⁶ Lindsey, “The Plains & Deserts of north America”, June 22, 1849, Western Americana Collection.

chisel was a practice that afforded them a measure of excitement and respite from the monotony of the trail. For others, it was a way to leave their mark or to take encouragement from reaching a landmark that so many of their fellow travelers had seen before them. Carving one's name in rock was an intentional act that took time and energy to participate in. Not every traveler had time or energy to spend on such distractions. Yet, every wagon that was pushed or pulled over the granite foothills of the South Pass near Register Cliff, approaching the Rocky Mountains, contributed to another signature carved in stone.

As the ground buckled between the plains and the Rocky Mountains, outcroppings of exposed sandstone peppered the foothills. Once the trail approached the mountains, soil increasingly gave way to stone patches that wrought havoc on wagon trains. Early emigrants likely did their best to avoid these patches, but doing so would have cost precious time and in some places avoidance proved impossible. Over the course of twenty years the time it took to travel the trails to Oregon decreased dramatically.⁶⁷ As more emigrants traveled the overland trail, their routes became more defined and direct. In the foothills of Wyoming, as travel increased after the first few years of the 1840s, the winding labyrinth of gulleys and canyons forced trains to ride over outcrops of sandstone instead of around them.⁶⁸ In some places, such as Deep Rut Hill near Gurnsey Wyoming, stretches of the soft sandstone bed were worn down as much as four feet in order to accommodate wagons.⁶⁹ These extreme instances were the result of decades of not only

⁶⁷ John D. Unruh in *The Plains Across* included a table on page 403 that shows how the trail routes solidified and became easier and quicker to navigate as years went on.

⁶⁸ Meldahl, *Hard Road West*, 76-77.

⁶⁹ Meldahl, *Hard Road West*, Fig 5.2, 77.

wagons passing, but also scores of emigrants chipping at the sandstone walls with shovels, picks, or chisels. Even in instances where migrants had cut down to the floor of the landscape, using the same tools that they carved their names in Register Cliff, wagon wheel grooves wore down as much as twelve inches below ground level. The places where wagon trains literally cut through rock outcroppings are dramatic artifacts of the decades-long migrations in which every traveler carved their passage in stone.

Numerous cultures met frequently on the overland trail as the force of westward migration continued to roll all the way to the West Coast. Each half of the trail, from the plains to the crossing of the Rocky Mountain pass, and from the west of South Pass to the Willamette Valley in Oregon territory, held different challenges for migrants, and unique complications for a multitude of distinct Indian cultures. At times those meetings were violent, but overwhelmingly the meetings were amicable, pleasant, and beneficial to at least one party. In many cases, the meetings were mutually beneficial as opportunities, economic or otherwise, brought two seeming different people into the same space. However, for Indians, the meetings ultimately were a part of a larger system that overwhelmed their ability to sustain their previous ways of life. In this way, emigrants were, knowingly or not, complicit in a process of dispossession of Indian people. Emigrants as individuals, just like Indians, held a wide range of personal beliefs about the “other.” Yet, whatever their intentions, once the stream of emigration started, it seems that there was little that anyone was willing to do to stop it.

Although most relations, particularly on the plains, were amicable, emigrants’ attitudes towards Indians led to more tense relations with a higher propensity for

violence. American emigrants relegated Indians to the position of aggressors who were to be met with increased aggression. Additionally, emigrants recirculated violent rhetoric against Indians in their journals, which was fed to them through popular opinion that echoed sentiments from captivity narratives and trail guide books. The prevalence of anti-Indian rhetoric that emigrants *regenerated*, to use Slotkin's terminology, served to simultaneously undermine Indians' claims to the West because Indians either did not deserve land or were in danger of extinction so land-holdings would be wasted on them, while emigrants asserted physical claims to the lands at each end of Indian territory and claims of ideological colonialism from the East to West coasts by mid-century. Finally, emigrants asserted a form of domination over the land occupied by Indians by using resources and damaging the landscape without regard. Emigrants exacerbated environmental deterioration on the plains that was well under way in the mid-19th century and they used resources that Indians relied upon for sustenance.

CHAPTER IV

BEWARE OF THE SNAKE: INDIAN AND EMIGRANT INTERACTIONS

AT THE END OF THE OREGON TRAIL

The water level in the north fork of the Smith River near Crescent City was at its lowest point toward the end of the summer of 1853, but its flow was quick enough to mask the sound of a lone figure, who hid behind a bush on the opposite shore and watched a group of emigrants. Two of the emigrants—both white men—went about setting up a tent near the river bank, while a third secured a rope around his mules. A man behind the bush on the opposite bank loaded a single round into his rifle. He had pounded the previously spent lead into shape by hand and repacked it into a cartridge.¹ While the men of the group on the far shore worked, a smooth-bore rifle barrel silently aimed at the young man with the mules. The shooter waited patiently until his target was most exposed, then he gently pulled the trigger. As the shot flew, the targeted man fell to the ground; his hands dropped the rope and covered his face. The two men setting up the tent instinctively ducked down. The shooter saw that his shot had missed, having barely passed over the mule wrangler's right shoulder and embedded into a piece of driftwood on shore. Before anyone could react, the shooter was gone, putting the river, trees, and brush between himself and his targets. Retribution for the killing of his kin in a migrant camp just days before would have to wait.

¹ Daniel Giles wrote in his memoir that the projectile that embedded itself into a piece of driftwood after narrowly missing his head “was about an ounce and a half of led [sic] that had bin [sic] pounded into shape to fit a half inch smooth bore gun.” Daniel Giles, “Journal of 1853,” CB G391, Accounts of Journeys to the Pacific Northwest, Special Collections, Knight Library, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon, 17.

The victim of this retribution was a young man named Daniel Giles. He learned a few days later that he had been targeted after “some packers” had killed one of several Indians found in their camp. Giles wrote of his encounter that “this Indian was seeking revenge, and I came near being that revenge.”² Young Daniel had unwittingly become involved in a cycle of violence and retribution that nineteenth century Americans perpetuated as an over-simplified story of treacherous Indians preying on overland trail migrants. The perpetrators of this particular narrative often excluded any justification for the seemingly high prevalence of “Indian Depredations” that took place in Oregon, near the end of the overland trail.

While Giles' migrant journey included a hostile interaction with an Indian, most emigrants' trips did not. The majority of overland emigrant journeys did, of course, include encounters with Indians of various distinct identities. Yet despite emigrants' fears of encountering hostile Indians like Giles had, their actual interactions were largely insignificant incidents, often acknowledged only curtly with some contempt that the diarist had been in the company of “some Indians.”³ Interactions between Indians and Americans on the section of the overland trail from the Rocky Mountains to Oregon, much as they been on the Plains, occurred frequently and were predominantly amicable.

The Giles family's experience is evidence, though, that not all of the hostile encounters between migrants and Indians were the product of rumor or emigrant speculation. Emigrants often described areas along the trail that they considered to be

² Daniel Giles, “Journal of 1853,” CB G391, Accounts of Journeys to the Pacific Northwest, Special Collections, Knight Library, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon, 18.

³ Based on a survey of nearly 75 trail journals/diaries within the collection housed at the Knight and Bancroft libraries, the mention of Indian interaction is often no more than along the lines of “saw some Indians” or “Indians at camp” or “lots of Indians around” [the fort], and so on.

dangerous for American settlers or home to some of the most violent Indians. Ironically, despite emigrants making such claims about Pawnee or Sioux territory, the majority of hostile interactions between Indians and American emigrants occurred on the second half of the trail from the Continental Divide to Oregon.⁴

While the reasons for increased hostility between Indians and Americans in Oregon are numerous, environmental factors and trade relationships are particularly compelling causes.⁵ Although hostilities were rare, Government reports and emigrants' trail diaries corroborate that particularly hostile interactions took place along the western portion of the overland trail. Environmental factors such as the seasonality of resource availability and Indian resource management influenced the interactions between Indigenous people and emigrants who impinged on seasonal resources. Trade issues also influenced interactions between Northwest Indians and emigrants. Northwest Indian peoples were well tuned to seasonal cycles of subsistence, and in the time before those cycles were severely disrupted by United States' encroachment, there was little need to trade with migrants who, at the end of their journey, had little to offer Indians. These two factors, the physical environment of the Pacific Northwest and the trade relationship between Indian peoples and outsiders were crucial in determining the level of civility between Indians and emigrants.

⁴ John D. Unruh wrote that "approximately 90 percent of all emigrant killings took place west of South Pass, principally along the Snake and Humboldt rivers and on the Applegate Trail." John D. Unruh, *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 185.

⁵ Indian peoples in the Northwest responded to constraints placed upon them by an American colonial process in increasingly violent incidents. The massacre at the Whitman mission in 1847 was the result of religious and biological intrusion into Indian lives. Within a decade the United States was waging war against the tribes of Oregon in an attempt to subdue and contain Indians on reservations in order to clear the land for American settlement.

After crossing the Rocky Mountains emigrants left the territories of the most feared Indian groups—the Sioux and Pawnee—on the plains behind them. However, there were Indian peoples ahead still on their journey that greatly concerned emigrants. As her train approached the Snake River in eastern Idaho Elizabeth Goltra remarked in her journal that “The Indians are very hostile in this vicinity.” She explained, “a man was killed here a few days ago in the act of drinking out of the branch [of the river] when an Indian shot an arrow through his heart.”⁶ Goltra went on to lament that this unfortunate emigrant had left a wife and “two little children to his loss here on the dreary plains,” and she remarked that it was unsafe for any emigrants to stray from camp, because the Indians “lay in ambush and watch their opportunity, and as their weapons make no report they only wait for one to get out of sight of camp and they are sure of him for they seldom miss their mark.” Goltra, like many of her contemporary travelers, wrote with an assuredness that the stories that they heard from other emigrants regarding Indian hostilities were true. If the party that Goltra belonged to was like most emigrant trains, she or someone in her party likely passed this story on to others, furthering the notion of Indian savagery.

The cumulative effect of the emigrants’ assertions of Indian wickedness was the wholesale acceptance of such statements by other migrants. In his 1850 trail diary, William Frush wrote after one of the many crossings of the Snake River in central Idaho that “there was a number of the Digger Indians at Salmon Falls fishing. They had bin

⁶ Elizabeth J. Goltra, “Journal of 1853,” August 10, 1853, A34, Folder 3, Accounts of Journeys to the Pacific Northwest, Special Collections, Knight Library, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

some hostile to small trains ahead of us[, but] they were civil to us.”⁷ Frush had not witnessed any hostility firsthand, but in denigrating Indians in a way that contradicted his experiences he took part in a tradition of overland trail diarists in which travelers wrote of the expected hostility of Indians while not experiencing the fruition of those expectations. Very few overlanders wrote that they had been made aware at camp, or by those heading back East, that the upcoming Indian bands were friendly and amicable. Rather, travelers were told that they were about to head straight into hostility and that they had better keep guard. A few days after crossing the Snake, Frush reported that his party had passed another train from Missouri that had “[three] horses stolen from them in the night before by the Indians.” While Frush did not write further of this incident, he possibly passed the news on to others as a means of warning fellow migrants of Indian depredations. Young Daniel Giles, ironically—considering the nearly fatal attack on his life—observed in his journal “the whole country was full of Indians and no one knew when they were safe, for we all knew that they were treacherous and was liable to scalp you at any time that they got a chance, so everybody had to go armed and be on the watch all the time.”⁸ No matter the personal experiences of the writer, the fact that Indians were treacherous along the trail, and especially in the vicinity of and west of the Snake River, was a fact that migrants knew and accepted as truth just as they had on the plains in insisting that Pawnee and Sioux peoples were particularly hostile.

⁷ William Frush, “Diary of Overland Trip from Missouri to Oregon - 1850,” August 5, 1850, A38, *Accounts of Journeys to the Pacific Northwest*, Special Collections, Knight Library, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

⁸ Giles, “Journal of 1853,” 14, *Journeys to the Pacific Northwest*.

While emigrant correspondence represented a more casual barometer of the level of Indian “hostility” at any one point in time or place, government reports provide a more thoroughly detailed description of the situation on the ground. In his 1857 annual report, Commissioner of Indian Affairs James W. Denver suggested that “special attention” be paid to the reports by Indian agents in Oregon and Washington, which demonstrated that

relations with the Indians in those Territories are in a very critical condition, and that under the existing state of things there is a constant liability to a general outbreak on their part from any disturbing cause, which must involve the expenditure of millions to subdue them, as well as the most lamentable loss of life and property by the insufficiently protected white inhabitants.⁹

This warning came two years after a significant amount of violence had broken out in Oregon. The Indian uprisings of 1855 in Oregon Territory were clearly (and admittedly, according to some Indian Agents) exacerbated by the United States military. The 1855 violence grew out of increasingly tense relations between whites and Yakima Indians in Oregon after more than a decade of intrusion into Indian territory by overland migrants. Yakima Indians killed “several” miners, and ultimately an Indian agent, in retribution for the theft of Yakima horses and an assault of a Yakima woman.¹⁰ The result of the 1855 Indian “wars,” then, was increased hostility between Pacific Northwest Indian groups and Americans—both civilians and soldiers. As the Indian Agent at Silitz remarked in his report, “at present they regard the white man as their natural enemy.”¹¹ Such sentiments were repeated in many of the individual agency reports to the commissioner in 1857.

⁹ Report of The Commissioner of Indian Affairs for the Year 1857 (Washington: William A. Harris, 1857), p. 11.

¹⁰ Andrew H. Fisher, *Shadow Tribe: The Making of Columbia River Indian Identity* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010), 54.

¹¹ Report of The Commissioner of Indian Affairs for the Year 1857, p. 357.

In his 1858 report to the commissioner of Indian affairs, Superintendent of the Oregon and Washington Indian Agencies J.W. Nesmith relayed the extent to which the American presence in Oregon Territory had exacerbated the conflicts that exploded in 1855. Nesmith wrote that before American emigrations began, “while there were but few whites, and the fish and game abundant,” the level of hostility between Indian and Euro-American peoples was relatively low.¹² However, “when the country came to be more densely populated, and the fish and game began to disappear, the Indians then discovered that their resources for obtaining a livelihood had been curtailed by the intrusion of whites, and, as it was frequently alleged, began to pilfer and steal to prevent actual starvation.” Nesmith wrote further that Indian theft, whether retributive or not, was met with “frequent occasions to punish them,” and that “each act of outrage provoked retaliation” until the tensions resulted in war in 1855.¹³ While Nesmith appeared to have a nuanced understanding of the cause and effect relationship of inter-ethnic violence in Oregon, his report went on to conclude that as of 1858, all of the “vagabond and outlaw Indians” had “since been hunted down and taken to the reservation.”¹⁴ Given that various forms of Indian resistance did not cease in 1858, the finality of Nesmith’s assertion that his Indian problem had been contained is highly suspect.

The patterns of Indian response and resistance that pushed back against European and American encroachment in the first half of the nineteenth century continued into the latter half as more and more outsiders moved in to settle the already occupied land. The

¹² Report of The Commissioner of Indian Affairs for the Year 1858 (Washington: William A. Harris, 1858), p. 214.

¹³ Report of The Commissioner of Indian Affairs for the Year 1858, p. 214.

¹⁴ Report of The Commissioner of Indian Affairs for the Year 1858, p. 214.

result was a self-reinforcing system of violence. Americans felt entitled to settle the Oregon territory, while the Indians who had lived there for thousands of years felt entitled to defend their land. The more that northwestern Indians fought back, the more Americans were sent west to occupy forts, establish reservations, or homestead and occupy the land. Over time, Indian resistance changed as U.S. military operations began in the Northwest. Instead of resisting against well-armed, concentrated groups of soldiers, Indians targeted individual migrants to try and stave off the flow of whites into Oregon. Once American citizens became the victims of Indian depredations, the military presence increased along the overland trail, and the resulting tensions played out in the form of acts of mass-violence perpetrated by both Indians and whites.¹⁵

It is difficult, nonetheless, to sift through conflicting reports of Indian depredations without addressing the complexity of such claims. Indians certainly acted violently towards migrants along the trail. Yet, as a group, Indians were more likely to be the victims of violence than the perpetrators of it. Along the nearly two thousand mile overland trail, migrants encountered a vast diversity of Indian peoples, all of whom had different collective and individual motivations for their actions. The impression, then, of certain groups being more or less “hostile” was handed down to us by emigrants who had varying degrees of ability or inclination to differentiate between one Indian and another. And yet, numerous sources leave this nagging impression that the section of the trail west of the Snake River was, in fact, a more dangerous undertaking for Anglo migrants.

¹⁵ Fisher, Shadow Tribe, 54.

For nearly ten thousand years, long before encountering Europeans, Indian peoples had lived along the Columbia River, from its coastal outlet near present day Astoria all the way into the interior of eastern Oregon near Pendleton, where the river extends north into Washington.¹⁶ While some coastal peoples had encountered traders and trappers earlier, the Lewis and Clark expedition in 1806 was the first encounter that many interior peoples had with Euro-Americans. By the time the overland trail migrations began in the late 1830s, a mere three decades (yet, an entire generation,) had passed since that initial contact. While most other parts of North America had significantly more time to adjust to the shock of cultural (and biological) exchange between European and Indian peoples, the brief time between initial contact and full-scale American emigration may have been a factor in the ways in which Indian people reacted to the encroaching settlers.

Lewis and Clark walked into a land that was already in the process of cultural flux in 1805.¹⁷ Evidence of European peoples—mainly diseases and horses—was evident in the Northwest before they arrived en masse, which heavily influenced life for the Indigenous people. Various villages, the main identifying unit of Indians in the Northwest, already battled over one of the most sought after commodities—horses—to sell or trade to the Nez Perce or other horse cultures to the east. Indian people in the Northwest were also negotiating the changing political boundaries created through decimation by European diseases. Raids conducted by the so called “Snake” people of the river bearing the same name were feared by surrounding villages, which were often forced to relocate their

¹⁶ For a detailed discussion of the history of River Indian peoples in Oregon, see the first chapter in Fisher’s work, *Shadow Tribe*, 13-35.

¹⁷ Fisher, *Shadow Tribe*, 27.

generations-old settlements.¹⁸ Americans first entered the Pacific Northwest amidst this changing cultural landscape and exacerbated the pre-existing tensions they found there.

Despite efforts by British and French traders and missionaries to shape the Northwest into a more controlled environment, a precarious calm had settled over the area by the 1820s, allowing for some trade relationships that were mutually beneficial to Europeans and Indians.¹⁹ The subtly easing tensions centered on various autonomous Indian groups who had to contend with new groups of people who were not obviously or explicitly more powerful than they were. At the same time, British merchants and employees of the Hudson Bay Company saw the Indians' assertion of control over the Oregon and Washington territories as a problem that derived from a general "lawlessness," but which really stemmed from a belief on behalf of the newcomers that they legitimately belonged there.²⁰ Despite European desires to control trade, Indian peoples of the Northwest saw no reason to acquiesce their control over land or resources to newcomers.

During the mid-nineteenth century, trade was the most common form of contact between Indians and emigrants along the overland trail. Early in the migrations of the 1840s, emigrants wrote of buying Indian "trinkets" from "Fort Indians" or alongside the trail itself.²¹ Moccasins and buffalo robes were highly tradable commodities on the

¹⁸ Fisher, *Shadow Tribe*, 27.

¹⁹ Fisher, *Shadow Tribe*, 30.

²⁰ Fisher, *Shadow Tribe*, 30.

²¹ Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 162.

Plains.²² Emigrant journals on this stretch often mentioned Indians stationed along the side of the trail, looking to trade their wares for food as bison meat became increasingly scarce—as a consequence of the high demand for buffalo based commodities—and Indian agencies succeeded in varying degrees at providing food for Plains Indians. However, by the time weary migrants crossed the Snake River, many had already abandoned as many of their belongings as possible, leaving them little in the way of goods to offer in trade. Oftentimes they were in desperate need of food themselves.²³

Once emigrants made the multiple crossings of the winding Snake river in Idaho and the desert plateau of eastern Oregon, trade became different than it had been along other sections of the trail, particularly because of the unique power dynamic that existed throughout the early to mid-nineteenth century. By the time that emigrants were interacting with Northwest Indians, the interior Oregon peoples had been trading among themselves for generations; emigrants just brought a new customer base.²⁴ What separated trade interactions in the Northwest were three key factors: what Indians were offering for sale or trade, what Indians were accepting as payment for these goods or services, and what Indian traders thought constituted a transaction.

While European traders in the Northwest were concerned primarily with animal furs, Indians in Oregon made a living trading two main commodities: horses and food.

²² Jane Eakin, who traveled the trail en route to her new home in Eugene, Oregon, wrote in 1866 that her father had purchased two buffalo robes on a cold evening near Fort Laramie. Jane Eakin, “Diary of Her Family’s Journey Across the Plains in 1866,” June 9, 1866, A30, Box 1, Accounts of Journeys to the Pacific Northwest, Special Collections, Knight Library, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

²³ Weldon Willis Rau, *Surviving The Oregon Trail: 1852 As Told By Mary Ann and Willis Boatman and Augmented with Accounts by Other Overland Travelers* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 2001), 187.

²⁴ For a discussion of Indian trade in horses and furs, see Fisher, 29-31.

Horses were a high priced item in the Northwest, as in other Indian territories. After their introduction in the sixteenth century in the Americas, horses had proliferated as a feral species by the eighteenth century.²⁵ Horses were desired by Plains Indians and Northwest peoples alike. Some villages made lucrative livings as collectors and traders of horses that they would deliver to markets near the Rocky Mountains.²⁶ Horses also proved to be a good item for Native peoples to sell on the trail. Migrants' livestock was often worn out by the last third of the trail, and Indians were willing to sell replacements and buy tired stock. Elizabeth Goltra wrote in August 1853 that there were "plenty of Indians about our camp with fish and ponies for trade" along the Umatilla River.²⁷ The quality and rumored availability of Indian horses along the trail led some migrants to under-prepare for their journey, as they assumed they would find Indians willing to sell or trade ponies more often than they did, and occasionally migrants suffered long walks as a result.²⁸

More lucrative than ponies, was the sale of foodstuffs to hungry migrants near the end of a long journey. Migrants often wrote of welcoming fresh, or sometimes new and unfamiliar foods offered to them by local Indians. Elizabeth Goltra wrote that "some Nez Perces Indians came along with some potatoes and peas," which were "a welcome vegetable to emigrants."²⁹ Another emigrant, Peter Burnett, also purchased potatoes in Oregon—and noted in his journal that "I have never tasted a greater luxury than the

²⁵ For a detailed discussion regarding the proliferation of horses in North America following the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 see Elliott West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998), 49-52.

²⁶ Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 162-63.

²⁷ Goltra, "Elizabeth Goltra Papers," August 21, 1853, *Journeys to the Pacific Northwest*.

²⁸ Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 162.

²⁹ Goltra, "Elizabeth Goltra Papers," September 2, 1853, *Journeys to the Pacific Northwest*.

potatoes we are [having] on this occasion. We had been so long without fresh vegetables that we were almost famished, and consequently we feasted this day excessively.”³⁰ Near the Snake River, Jane Eakin remarked in her journal that there were “lots of Indians. Father traded for fish.”³¹ Many migrants were thrilled to get a taste for fresh or smoked salmon in the Northwest. In *The Plains Across*, John Unruh recounts two statements from emigrants who wrote that they “got the first taste of Salmon, and you had better think we feasted,” and that it was “the best fish I ever ate.”³² It may have appeared to migrants that they benefitted most from these transactions, but what they often overlooked was that Indian traders held the upper hand, not because they relied upon this trade to survive, but because they provided a service to the migrant communities. This was a service for which they were handsomely paid.

Among the items that Northwest Indians received as payment for trade were weapons and ammunition that could be used as the tools of resistance. Indians on the overland routes of the Plains traded goods in exchange for food because their means of sustenance had severely diminished throughout the nineteenth century. In Oregon Territory, Indians commanded a seller’s market, and buyers often paid in cash and munitions. Although bartering was the preferred method for conducting business, some migrants wrote of Indians accepting cash payments for some goods. William Frush, in 1850, wrote that there were plenty of Salmon caught out of the Columbia River by Indians, “which is [their] principal living...They sell them at \$1 apiece or a shirt for a

³⁰ Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 165.

³¹ Jane Eakin, “Diary of Her Family’s Journey Across the Plains in 1866,” July 8, 1866, *Journeys to the Pacific Northwest*.

³² Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 165.

salmon.”³³ Far more numerous than cash payments were trades conducted for a payment of lead and powder. In 1850, Timothy Davenport paid for his peas and “other vegetables” to a group of Cayuse Indians with ammunition.³⁴ Elizabeth Goltra, in 1853, traded some moccasins for “shirts, powder and balls.”³⁵ Emigrants sometimes addressed the potential problem of trading munitions for less nefarious goods. Mrs. S.D. Evans, in 1863, wrote of an Indian that came into her camp and “wanted to trade for a gun but we had no gun to trade and it was not considered good policy to trade guns or ammunition to Indians, but unprincipled people did it.”³⁶ It is unclear whether Mrs. Evan’s sentiment was the result of changing acceptable social norms for emigrants towards trading guns and ammunition with Indians, or whether it simply reflected her personal opinion. What is clear is that trade with migrants provided Indians in the Northwest with the materials necessary for them to resist white encroachment and to vie for positions of power with competing Indian groups.³⁷

³³ Frush, “Diary of Overland Trip from Missouri to Oregon - 1850,” September 6, 1850, Journeys to the Pacific Northwest.

³⁴ Timothy Davenport, “Memoirs of Dr. Timothy W. Davenport,” p. 94, Ax 242, Box 3, Folder 30, Accounts of Journeys to the Pacific Northwest, Special Collections, Knight Library, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

³⁵ Goltra, “Elizabeth Goltra Papers,” August 10, 1853, Journeys to the Pacific Northwest.

³⁶ S.D. Evans, “A Trip From Washoe, Nevada, To Douglas County, Oregon in 1863,” p. 1, CB Ev16, Accounts of Journeys to the Pacific Northwest, Special Collections, Knight Library, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

³⁷ Elliott West discusses the advantages and drawbacks of Indians using weapons to hunt or to maintain a military edge over other Indians or Americans. West’s discussion takes place on the plains, where bison hunting took place out in the open and the risk of herd animals being scared off by a gunshot that missed its mark were too great. In this scenario, West concluded that guns were mostly used on the plains for offense and defense against human beings. While guns could have been used for hunting in the forests of Oregon, it is much more likely that Indian people relied upon time-tested means of supplementing their main food source—fish—and conserved ammunition that had to be traded with Euro-Americans. Since ammunition was not easily obtained and was not manufactured by Indian peoples in the Northwest, it is likely that they reserved it for the most immediate threat they faced—the steady influx of armed Americans that flowed past their villages. See West, *The Contested Plains*, 48-49.

While the majority of trade interactions were amicable, American emigrants misunderstood certain aspects of what constituted trade, which reinforced the perception that Northwest Indians were particularly hostile. Most notable were incidents where Indians “demanded” that migrants pay tolls to pass through their lands and the ever persistent issue of horse “thieving” along the overland trail. In each case, the reasons that emigrants associated with Indian actions were sometimes the result of cultural misunderstandings of what constituted land use and payment.

In an effort to recover a portion of their lost resources due to emigrant’s intrusion on their territories, many Indians established toll points along the trail route.³⁸ In some instances Indians attempted to appeal to reason by explaining that the large numbers of people moving through the area depleted firewood, grasses, or food sources that Indians depended on for sustenance.³⁹ In some cases, emigrants willingly paid Indian tolls. In others, they either did not understand the connection between the toll being charged and the reason behind it—such as compensation for natural resources—or they could not or cared not to pay the toll for another reason. The 1850 diary of Timothy Davenport recounted a scenario in which his train was confronted with a toll “for the privilege of passing through their [the Indian’s] country,” to which one member of their party sternly objected.⁴⁰ Tensions flared for a matter of moments before cooler heads prevailed and the leader of the train asked what the toll was, to which the reply came: “50 cents a wagon.”

³⁸ Tolls and paid ferry crossings were common business ventures for Indians and Euro-Americans alike along the entirety of the overland trail. For a more detailed discussion of tolls and ferry crossings in general, see Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 288-291; for Indian operated tolls in particular, see 169-173.

³⁹ Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 169 - 170.

⁴⁰ Davenport, “Memoirs of Dr. Timothy W. Davenport,” *Journeys to the Pacific Northwest*, 73.

Most members of the train felt that such a request was quite reasonable, and all paid the toll, shaming the naysayer into doing the same. Fifty cents appears to have been the going rate for most tolls, and while many migrants paid them, others saw the tolls as extortion.⁴¹

Similar tensions arose at Indian operated ferry crossings, where whites complained bitterly about ferry crossing rates.⁴² Although ferries were operated by many different kinds of people on the overland routes—Americans, Euro-American traders, Mormons—on the western portion of the trail Indian ferry operators dominated the trade.⁴³ Yet, here was one area where Indian ferry operators experienced some equality with Anglos, as emigrants appeared mostly concerned with paying what they considered to be fair prices for safe water passage.⁴⁴ Some emigrants, such as William Frush observed that the operators of a ferry crossing on the Columbia were Indian: “this river you will ferry in canoes it is kept by [Indians],” but many diaries mention only that they paid for ferry services, and noted whether or not the price was fair.⁴⁵ One explanation for this is that Indian ferry services were far less common than white-operated ferries—which we know to be untrue in the Northwest. However, if emigrants’ journal entries that commented on ferries were expanded to consider the entirety of the overland route, it seems the reason

⁴¹ Emigrant Sarah Pratt recounted a similar tale as that told by William Frush, in which her parents went through an Indian toll and paid the fifty cent toll to continue unabated. Rau, *Surviving The Oregon Trail*, 31.

⁴² Historian Richard White wrote that conflicts over Indian fees for services like ferry crossings or portages had been a point of contention going back to the turn of the century. Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 14.

⁴³ Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 157.

⁴⁴ John Unruh provides a thorough discussion of Indian and white operated ferry operations on pages 285-289 of *The Plains Across*.

⁴⁵ Frush, “Diary of Overland Trip from Missouri to Oregon - 1850,” September 4, 1850, *Journeys to the Pacific Northwest*.

the ethnicity of the operator was not mentioned in most cases was because the operator represented the assumed norm. This interpretation is consistent with emigrants writing disparaging comments about Indians in their journals that were often framed in terms of being cheated, by an Indian no less. What emigrants failed to realize in regards to both tolls or ferry crossing fees was that travelers strained Indian resources or imposed on Indians' time as they safely navigating goods across waterways.

The highest frequency of misunderstandings leading to hostility came when trade and perceived extortion combined in the form of Indian retributive stealing from migrants. Historian Andrew Fisher argued that the practice of Indians stealing from emigrants was a form of retribution and wrote that many Indians in Oregon viewed Americans as “unwelcome and ungrateful intruders,” who used up natural resources “without permission or compensation.”⁴⁶ In return, native peoples pilfered small amounts of migrant's belongings. Fisher's analysis illustrates the motives for Indian theft along the trail, but also provides an idea as to why whites might misconstrue the meaning behind these thefts and miss the point entirely. From migrants' perspectives, Indians were simply thieves that could not be trusted. This distrust resulted in numerous migrants' journals referring to Indians in derogatory language, like that of S. B. Eakin, who remarked after passing a group of Indians who “showed no signs of trouble, but we kept a close watch on the treacherous beings.”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Fisher, *Shadow Tribe*, 33.

⁴⁷ S.B. Eakin, “A Short Sketch of a Trip ‘Across the Plains’,” June 2, 1866, AE 52, *Accounts of Journeys to the Pacific Northwest*, Special Collections, Knight Library, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

The shrewd business practices of some Indians who traded in horses further drove the perception that Indians were thieves.⁴⁸ One migrant, frustrated that he was unable to negotiate with a Snake Indian for a horse, wrote that [the Indian] “had some beautiful horses but we could get none of them,” while another noted that Indian traders in Oregon were “very sharp traders not easily cheated.”⁴⁹ In 1852, emigrant John Kerns, after visiting the Umatilla River, remarked that he had encountered “plenty of Indians along here of the Walla Walla tribe” and that they “would steal swill from the hogs if they had a favorable lay.”⁵⁰ Such statements revealed the attitudes of many whites at the time. The prevailing opinion thus simultaneously assumed that Indians could, or should, be easily cheated out of whatever it is that whites wanted from them, but if Indians asserted the slightest hint of a similar cunning, they were not to be trusted.

The unintentional transmission of European diseases was a final form of trade that severely affected the relationship between Indians and emigrants.⁵¹ Smallpox first appeared in the Northwest in 1787, although it is not known whether it came via the Nez Perce or Flatheads during seasonal trading fairs, or from seafaring Europeans landing on the coast.⁵² While the origin of smallpox in the Northwest remains disputed, it is clear that by 1802 Lewis and Clark saw signs of the disease and wrote that it had “destroyed a

⁴⁸ For a discussion of the correlation between increasing prices for horses the farther west one traveled, see Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 164.

⁴⁹ Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 162.

⁵⁰ Rau, *Surviving The Oregon Trail*, 188.

⁵¹ For an in-depth discussion of smallpox in the Northwest, see Elizabeth A. Fenn, *Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-82* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 224-258.

⁵² Elizabeth A. Fenn, *Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-82* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 229, 239, 254.

great number of the natives in this [the Clatsops] quarter.”⁵³ In the brief period between the first written accounts of smallpox in 1787 and 1782, over twenty five thousand Northwest Indians had succumbed to the disease, more than from any other single geographic region during those outbreaks.⁵⁴

Northwestern Indian peoples ravaged by European diseases responded with retributive killings against Euro-Americans. Significant outbreaks of smallpox occurred in 1801 and again in the 1820s, which not only had an effect on Indian populations, but also introduced a direct association between American interlopers and disease.⁵⁵ Migrants remarked in their journals that Indians targeted whites as revenge for loved ones lost to disease. In 1853, Daniel Giles made a short entry in his memoir about a horrific encounter at Fort Boise where there were “several hundred Indians” camped at the fort who were “dying like everything with the Small Pox and they blamed the white people for bringing the disease amongst them, and we had to be more guarded than ever for they would get revenge if they could.”⁵⁶ As the first of American migrants arrived via the overland routes Northwest indigenes felt a more pressing and immediate intrusion and pushed to assert their political and social position against whites.

Throughout the nineteenth century, newly formed trading relationships between Indians and Europeans began to break down as Indians witnessed their lands and social structures being threatened. The brief period of contact between 1806 and the onset of

⁵³ Fenn, *Pox Americana*, 256.

⁵⁴ Fenn, *Pox Americana*, 274.

⁵⁵ Fisher, *Shadow Tribe*, 27-28.

⁵⁶ Giles, “Journal of 1853,” *Journeys to the Pacific Northwest*, 7.

overland migrations in 1840 shaped the climate of trade interactions between Indians and whites in the Pacific Northwest. Americans, harkening to their British colonial roots, expected that the previous two hundred years of history was relevant in their endeavors to expand across continental North America. American emigrants appeared frustrated when the Northwest peoples did not readily accept the notion of American exceptionalism that would soon be articulated as Manifest Destiny. Likewise, the span of a few decades was not a sufficient amount of time to convince Indian peoples in the Northwest that any one imperial power was destined to control trade or win cultural supremacy of the area. Had outsiders fostered longstanding relationships with Indians earlier, and for a longer period of time before emigration brought widespread settler encroachment into the Northwest, it is possible (although unlikely) that the pressure building throughout the early nineteenth century would not have resulted in massacres, warfare, and reservations.

As it had on the plains, the land itself played a critical role in the relations between Indians and emigrants in the Pacific Northwest. Environmental historian William Cronon asserted that the environment of the Northeast influenced relationships between Native peoples and Europeans in ways that, while very real, were invisible to Europeans at the time.⁵⁷ Cronon argued that seasonality of resource management was a vital component of the story of European contact; the time of year, and how that related to Indian cycles of subsistence, were important factors in the development of relationships between Indians and Europeans. The same concept was true for Indian and emigrant relationships in the Northwest. Seasonality of resources, coupled with territorial

⁵⁷ William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).

rights and the management of resources in Indian territory, played an enormous role in the interactions between Indians and emigrants in the Pacific Northwest.

Indians of the Northwest depended upon salmon as a primary food source and as a valuable trade item.⁵⁸ The spiritual and practical significance of salmon to Northwest peoples was comparable to that of the buffalo for Plains peoples.⁵⁹ Northwest peoples had intricate rituals that corresponded with the beginning of each fishing season. These rituals had to be conducted before fish could be traded or consumed.⁶⁰ Once Indians caught salmon, they had to be properly preserved in order to be transported to trading grounds or stored for later consumption. Preserving salmon incorporated a gendered division of labor among Northwest peoples; men caught fish and women processed fish by smoking or drying them.⁶¹ The process of curing salmon was intensive and included smoking the fish in specially made smokehouses or outside or breaking the fish down into smaller pieces before drying to speed up the preserving process and mitigate decomposition.⁶² The banks of the Columbia River—particularly at The Dalles—became seasonal markets in pre-contact times.⁶³ As salmon season began in early spring, people trekked from the

⁵⁸ Fisher, *Shadow Tribe*, 17-18.

⁵⁹ Colin G. Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count: The Native American West Before Lewis and Clark* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 47.

⁶⁰ Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count*, 49-51.

⁶¹ Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 18.

⁶² Joseph E. Taylor III, *Making Salmon: An Environmental History of the Northwest Fisheries Crisis* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 24.

⁶³ Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count*, 48.

surrounding regions to the Columbia to trade foods that had been acquired through hunting and gathering in exchange for protein rich salmon.⁶⁴

The yearly salmon runs, which river people became accustomed to over generations, occurred in seasonal phases. The first phase took place early in spring before snow runoff engorged the rivers and made fishing significantly more dangerous. It sustained Indian peoples after winter.⁶⁵ Many types of salmon ran during the spring and early summer, including the king salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*—which ran from February until November), sockeye (*O. nerka*), and coho (*O. kisutch*).⁶⁶ In the second phase, in late spring through mid summer, salmon were used for trade or sale.⁶⁷ King and coho salmon continued to run during this time, and were joined by the dog (or chum) salmon (*O. keta*).⁶⁸ As late as the end of July through fall, the season resumed, but for the most part this time meant gathering food stores to be used for the winter.⁶⁹ By this time the king (or Chinook) were the predominant variety of salmon harvested along the Columbia.⁷⁰ This seasonal fishing and trading pattern was the established norm at the turn of the nineteenth century when witnessed by Lewis and Clark, who wrote that salmon, if it could be obtained at all, could only be traded for a like value of food, but not

⁶⁴ Fisher, *Shadow Tribe*, 19.

⁶⁵ White, *The Organic Machine*, 17.

⁶⁶ Robert H. Ruby and John A. Brown, *Indians of the Pacific Northwest: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 21.

⁶⁷ Andrew Fisher noted that salmon trading was going on between Indian peoples, not between Indians and whites, as Indians prepared to supplement their winter stores with foodstuffs brought from elsewhere besides the river basin. Fisher, *Shadow Tribe*, 20.

⁶⁸ Ruby and Brown, *Indians of the Pacific Northwest*, 21.

⁶⁹ *Shadow Tribe*, 20.

⁷⁰ Ruby and Brown, *Indians of the Pacific Northwest*, 21.

currency.⁷¹ As American encroachment increased and Native populations declined—mostly due to disease—during the nineteenth century the demand for salmon rapidly outgrew the production capacity of native fisheries.⁷²

Trade with Europeans and subsequently with American emigrants altered the relationship that Northwest Indians had with salmon.⁷³ The exchanges of salmon for different foodstuffs that Lewis and Clark witnessed on the banks of the Columbia promoted an “ongoing relationship” among amicable trading partners.⁷⁴ Euro-Americans brought with them new ideas of trade and economics. Historian Joseph Taylor has argued that as the population balance shifted in favor of Americans in the second half of the nineteenth century that “aboriginal spirits no longer mediated harvests. Instead, settlers increasingly redefined nature as a set of commodities.”⁷⁵ The commoditization of salmon had specific and severe consequences for both salmon and human populations.⁷⁶ Outsiders’ demand for salmon dramatically affected the resource in the Northwest, and in turn, the humans who depended on them. The change happened quickly between 1806 when salmon was only traded for other food stuffs, and the late 1830s when salmon was traded for material goods or bought for cash. As fishing became increasingly tied to

⁷¹ White, *The Organic Machine*, 23.

⁷² White, *The Organic Machine*, 25-27.

⁷³ Historian Joseph Taylor argued that “Capitalism was the single most important force behind those activities that most affected salmon.” See Taylor III, *Making Salmon*, 45.

⁷⁴ White, *The Organic Machine*, 23.

⁷⁵ Taylor, *Making Salmon*, 45.

⁷⁶ Taylor argues in *Making Salmon* that historic salmon fishing and populations were dramatically altered through Americans’ commoditization of fish by the 1870s and that a decade later Americans complained that salmon runs in the Umatilla and Deschutes rivers were in serious decline. See Taylor, *Making Salmon*, 53.

monetary incentive through trade with emigrants, privately (or communally) held fishing grounds were apt to be more aggressively guarded. The defense of Northwest people's livelihood as fishermen that became increasingly hostile as the numbers of migrants coming into Oregon was a product of the economic changes that Lewis and Clark had introduced to the area a generation earlier.

It was during the final phase of the yearly salmon season, when Chinook stock was dwindling, that many migrants began to arrive in Oregon, having started their journey in early April. For the emigrants, who had seen Indians along river systems selling fish since crossing the Rocky Mountains, there was little difference between the three fishing seasons. For some Indians along the Columbia, however, as the summer transitioned into fall their primary concerns had shifted from trade to sustenance, an activity that had far less room for accommodation and amicability towards the encroachment of outsiders. Several migrants wrote of buying or trading fish with Indians west of the Snake River. Elizabeth Goltra's entry about Indians trading fish on the river was written in August.⁷⁷ William Frush, too, wrote on August 5 that there were "a number of the Digger Indians at Salmon Falls fishing," and on August 14 on the Snake River he noted that there were "plenty of Indians fishing on [the] river here."⁷⁸ Frush's accounts are interesting in that they mention that Indians were fishing, but not that they were trading their catch. Primary sources do not provide sufficient evidence to make substantial claims of a shift from Indians' fishing for trade and fishing for sustenance

⁷⁷ Goltra, "Elizabeth Goltra Papers," August 21, 1853, *Journeys to the Pacific Northwest*.

⁷⁸ Frush, "Diary of Overland Trip from Missouri to Oregon - 1850," August 14, 1850, *Journeys to the Pacific Northwest*.

gathering for the winter. Yet, while there is no direct evidence to suggest that such a shift directly resulted in more hostile interactions between Indians and migrants, the lack of evidence from primary sources can easily be explained by the narrow scope through which migrants viewed the world in regard to the daily experiences of Indians. Perhaps, though, migrants would have better understood the analogy that while a shopkeeper is happy to sell food to his customers during business hours, he is far less likely to be pleased about those customers barging in after hours and taking the food off of his family's dinner table.

Despite a pervasive popular perception of Indian history in which Indians had no concept of land ownership, there is evidence that river peoples understood very clear demarcations for land use when it came to fishing territories. Indian peoples along the Columbia River passed fishing grounds down through generations to both individuals and villages, while reserving some spots for communal fishing.⁷⁹ For friends or even strangers who were Indian, it was rare that anyone was turned away from the communal fishing grounds. Yet this same hospitality did not extend to private grounds, and it certainly did not extend to migrants.⁸⁰ Again, from the migrant's perspective, how would one know that they may be fishing in what was considered to be a privately held fishing

⁷⁹ Fisher, *Shadow Tribe*, 26.

⁸⁰ Anthropologist Phillip Drucker observed in similar fishing cultures on Vancouver Island that "Outsiders were prohibited from exploiting these owned places, except where they could claim kinship to the owner.", Phillip Drucker, "Rank, Wealth and Kinship in Northwest Coast Society," in Tom McFeat, ed., *Indians of the North Pacific Coast* (Ottawa: Macmillan, 1978), 140. Robert H. Ruby and John A. Brown wrote of an incident that occurred between Upper and Lower Chinook peoples where "The Upper Chinooks had failed to heed the warnings of the lower-river people not to invade the latter's clam beds" at which point the lower Chinooks "lured them into waist-high sword grass and pounced upon them." This incident is further evidence that Native people in the Pacific Northwest region closely guarded their fishing and hunting grounds and were not afraid to use violence to protect those areas. See Ruby and Brown, *Indians of the Pacific Northwest*, 20.

spot? While there is no direct evidence that Indians harmed emigrants for imposing themselves on Native fisheries, it is clear that Northwest Indian people took fishing sites very seriously when dealing with inter-Indian competition—at times to the point of violence. It does not seem too far of a stretch to imagine that emigrants feeling their way across an unfamiliar landscape filled with Indians which were considerably different from those on the plains might stumble into the wrong area and pay dearly for their mistake. Unfortunately, without a clear chain of evidence this claim can only be circumstantially considered.

Indian people not only had more complex conceptions of land use and ownership than whites gave them credit for, they also had sophisticated understandings of the cyclical availability of resources based on generations worth of collectively shared knowledge. Emigrants crossing into the mountains of the interior portions of Oregon remarked at the availability of resources such as grass for grazing or timber for fuel. These items appeared to the migrants to be free for their taking, but to Indian peoples who had lived in these areas for thousands of years, these resources were a part of the land that they lived and depended on. The inherited fishing grounds that Northwest Indians passed down through kinship ties were carefully selected in generations past based on maximum payoff for minimal effort.⁸¹ Spots near falls or large collections of

⁸¹ Although this study was not dealing with Oregon specifically, Phillip Drucker drew some general comparisons with fishing peoples of the Northwest. Although, his assertion that “localized groups of kin defined who lived together, worked together, and who jointly considered themselves exclusive owners of the tracts from which food and other prime materials were obtained” was a similar position that historians such as Richard White, Andrew Fisher, and Joseph Taylor would later take in regard to Northwest peoples and the ownership of fishing sites. Phillip Drucker, *Cultures of the North Pacific Coast* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1965), 47.

underwater rocks were prime locations for fishing salmon due to the relationship between these natural features and how fish populations gathered around these obstacles.⁸²

This study has already examined the ways in which Indians reacted to American encroachment and misuse of available resources, but it is important to address that behind these actions was a distinct difference in how the two groups understood resources.

Salmon once again provide a good example of the disparity between Indian and American views of resource management. While emigrants were delighted to find grass for their livestock and fuel for fires, they wrote most often of the plentiful fish to be found in the waterways of Oregon. Timothy Davenport wrote in 1850 as he crossed the Umatilla River that there were “fish and game in abundance, a rich soil and a most delicious air and delightful scenery.”⁸³ Jane Eakin wrote in 1866 that she “camped on the Snake River. Plenty fish in the river.”⁸⁴ Both of these accounts were written in the month of August, as Indian fishing patterns were changing and the salmon stocks were in the process of building back up for the second half of the salmon fishing season. What emigrants saw as an abundance was what Indians saw as resource management. Despite an estimated annual yield of 3,000 pounds of dried salmon per family and additional 1,000 pounds to be used for trade, Indians harvested well within sustainable limits of salmon stocks.⁸⁵

⁸² Richard White argued that “rapids and waterfalls forced fish into narrow channels; they forced salmon toward the surface” where “the fish became concentrated and visible” and “more vulnerable to capture.” White, *The Organic Machine*, 16. For detailed descriptions of Indian fishing techniques related to natural waterway features see White, *The Organic Machine*, 15-18.; Taylor, *Making Salmon*, 15-20.

⁸³ Davenport, “Memoirs of Dr. Timothy W. Davenport,” *Journeys to the Pacific Northwest*, 93.

⁸⁴ Jane Eakin, “Diary of Her Family’s Journey Across the Plains in 1866,” July 31, 1866, *Journeys to the Pacific Northwest*.

⁸⁵ Taylor, *Making Salmon*, 24.

Indian fishermen had an intimate working knowledge of salmon populations that allowed them to sustain fish yields through three seasonal runs.⁸⁶ This is not surprising, as it is impossible to accept that the people who fished the same places year after year, for decades, generations, millennium, did not have an acute understanding of these resources.⁸⁷ Indigenous fishermen employed various technologies that enabled them to control fish stocks, which were not always apparent to non-indigenous travelers.⁸⁸ River peoples used natural features that supported better yields of fish, or they augmented natural features by lining certain waterways with an abundance of small white stones so that dammed fish were more easily visible.⁸⁹ When emigrants encountered the same waterways they could see only pristine, uninterrupted nature, waiting to be harvested and stored.⁹⁰ Given such a fundamental difference between two groups of people as far as what constituted resources and how to manage them, it is also not difficult to imagine that Indians would violently protect fishing spots that were their birthright.

These environmental factors may very well account for some of the unexplained hostility that was directed at migrants along the overland trail. When Elizabeth Goltra wrote of the man who had been killed along the Snake River in August 1853, presumably, she asserted, for drinking out of the river, perhaps the victim's proximity to the water

⁸⁶ White, *The Organic Machine*, 17.

⁸⁷ In fact, Joseph Taylor wrote that Indians possessed an "encyclopedic knowledge of resources," and an "ecological understanding of nature." Taylor, *Making Salmon*, 35.

⁸⁸ Taylor, *Making Salmon*, 18.

⁸⁹ White, *The Organic Machine*, 16.

⁹⁰ Richard White frames this disconnect as a spatial issue, with Anglos perceiving the "space at the Cascades and the Dalles as open, as culturally empty," and that "Indians regarded it as full." White, *The Organic Machine*, 15.

carried more meaning than Goltra realized. What if this was a killing that was not random, or meaningless, but rather an act of which the meaning was unknown to the migrants who were encroaching upon the livelihood of Native protective of their ability to sustain themselves? Such a change of perspective may affect our understanding of the interactions between an invaded people and their invaders.

It is no surprise that cultural differences between Indians and Americans often led to misunderstandings and sometimes violence during the nineteenth century. This was a particularly volatile time for many groups that existed in overlapping social spheres in America. More than any other factor, Indians were acting against increasingly tight constraints placed upon them by the United States government from 1845 through the 1850s, a situation that was exacerbated by a constant stream of migrants that encroached upon their territories. These constraints manifested themselves through the different ways in which inherently different people dealt with their physical environment, their trade relations, and how they interacted with one another under duress. The trifecta of seasonal dependence, sensitive land demarcation, and resource availability forced Indians to react more violently than may have been the case with other Indian peoples at other points along the trail. Emigrants were also seasonally dependent on resources and relied upon trading with Northwest Indians peoples to replenish their sometimes dangerously low food supplies. The brief period of contact prior to mass migration into Oregon by Americans led to an accelerated tension that did not benefit from developing gradual, and reciprocal relationships between Indians and Americans. Both of these ideas are reflected in the ways in which Indians conducted trade. Trade was on their terms, and there was

little reason to change for invading whites. Indians' push to retain cultural and trade supremacy in the Northwest was received egregiously by an emigrant population who increasingly believed that their arrival in Oregon represented the fruition of Manifest Destiny. Cycles of seasonality gave way to cycles of violence that persisted throughout the entirety of the migrations to, and the settlement of, the Pacific Northwest.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The entirety of the overland trail route from Missouri to Oregon was occupied by distinct Indian peoples who had expectations about interacting with American emigrants based on their experiences with emigrant intrusion upon their lands. United States Indian agents recorded Indian concerns such as the loss of resources, the disappearance of game, and the degradation of land, and presented them annually to Washington, D.C.. Treaties were used to arbitrate Indian concerns, but also as a means to confine Indians onto lands which allowed for western expansion of the United States. Indian concerns varied depending upon their location. Plains Indians were largely concerned with the ability to feed themselves as bison herds dwindled throughout the nineteenth century. Northwest Indians were concerned about maintaining their hunting and fishing grounds, and fending off American encroachment.

Emigrants had different expectations of Indians. Despite an overwhelming amount of neutral or positive interactions, emigrants consistently expected Indians to act with hostility which put emigrants in a constant state of vigilance during the overland migrations. Emigrants' expectations were informed by guidebooks that followed a structure which frequently denigrated Indians. Guidebooks were partially informed by captivity narratives from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that followed their own unique and identifiable structure. Both guidebooks and captivity narratives affected the ways in which emigrants interacted with Indian peoples based on the expectations laid

out in those documents. Both of these types of documents spoke to larger issues of colonialism in North America while simultaneously justifying a settler colonial mindset on the ground level of the trail itself.

The reality of interactions between Indians and overland emigrants, as portrayed in emigrant journals, differed from the first half of the trail to the second half. Along the entirety of the trail, emigrants encountered Indian peoples on a regular basis that usually revolved around trade. On the plains emigrants traded with Indians for bison robes and moccasins. Emigrants also had a tendency to offer food to traveling Indians along the trail. Emigrants often feared interacting with Pawnee and Sioux Indians due to misconceptions perpetrated by guidebook authors. The actual encounters that emigrants experienced with these people were almost always amicable.

Indians offered a variety of support services to emigrants. Some Indians risked their lives to help emigrants in need, others operated ferry crossings or helped to cross emigrant livestock across waterways. Yet, despite these mutually beneficial trade relationships forged at trading posts and along the trail itself, emigrants still wrote of Indians as though they were likely to, at any time, reveal their true nature and harm emigrant families. In truth, emigrants crossed over the territories of dozens of people, disturbing game, using crucial resources, damaging the landscape, and bringing diseases with them. American emigrants asserted a form of ideological colonialism over Indian peoples on the plains as evidenced from the language they used and the demeanor they displayed in regard to Indians.

Across the second portion of the trail, from the Rocky Mountains to Oregon, it was still the norm that interactions between Indians and emigrants were amicable and revolved around trade. However, while incidents of violence were still quite rare, they were far more apt to occur along the waterways of Idaho and Oregon than at any other point of the overland trail. Two factors that influenced the increased likelihood for violence include a different sort of trade relationship between Indians and outsiders and a unique relationship between Indians and the physical environment. While emigrants still denigrated Indian peoples of the Northwest in their trail diaries and northwestern Indian agents called attention to the damage caused by emigrating overlanders, the response of Indian peoples in the region was different than that of plains societies.

Indian agent reports detailed a much more volatile situation in Oregon than on the plains, where American settlers aggravated tensions between Indians and the United States government. Emigration caused a self feeding system of new emigrants flowing into the Northwest, which disturbed Indian peoples who increasingly reacted violently, which caused the United States to increasingly reinforce its military presence in the region—the result was a powder keg that exploded halfway through the 1850s into war. Emigrants were often casualties of that war, in which Indian peoples did not necessarily discriminate between citizens and soldiers.

Yet, trade, not violence, was still the norm. In the Northwest, trade had shifted from emigrants trading for Indian “trinkets” on the plains to worn out emigrants replacing their tired livestock for fresh animals or for food to feed their families. This trade dynamic changed the nature of Indians trading in one of the most historically significant

goods of the Northwest—dried salmon. From the time when Lewis and Clark observed that Indians would only trade the fish for other foodstuffs—a tradition that had been in place for thousands of years at seasonal indigenous fish markets in the Northwest—to the start of the overland emigrations in the 1840s, the salmon trade had changed. Indians had started accepting material goods, and then cash money for salmon. As a steady flow of buyers moved through the Northwest the commodification of salmon increased until it was industrialized by settlers in the 1870s. Not only were Indians accepting cash payments, which indicates that they were able to spend that cash for other goods, they were increasingly trading food for weapons and ammunition.

The times when interactions did turn hostile were likely the result of emigrants misunderstanding the nuances of trade in the Northwest, that often included Indians seemingly demanding money without explaining that it was for resources that emigrants were using or after doing what emigrants assumed was a friendly favor. These kind of encounters fueled emigrants' perceptions that Indians in the Northwest were thieves. As was the case on the plains, hostile interactions occurred in Oregon over the perception that emigrants had brought disease with them. Indians reacted violently to what they saw as the cause of disease outbreaks that decimated Indian peoples. Other times, emigrants may have inadvertently wandered into areas that were known among Indian peoples as being privately controlled land used for fishing or gathering other foods.

The argument that emigrants were informed by a historical precedent for asserting themselves onto an occupied landscape that justified their actions is at the heart of this work. Emigrants consumed and reproduced colonial sentiments through settler

colonialism. This historical precedent reinforced Americans' justifications in supplanting Indian peoples as they invoked settler colonial claims which culminated in the nationwide acceptance of Manifest Destiny. In this way, emigrants were engaging in a process of historical memory that harkened as far back as the Roman and Greek empires as they moved across the overland trail. In doing so, they forged what I refer to as a new historical imagination, where they invented an America that they wanted to exist, based on a European past that they were convinced had existed. The preoccupation with violence, by nineteenth century American emigrants and the historians who study them, has trapped Indians within a binary of violent versus non-violent that lacks complexity and nuance. Ultimately, the emphasis on frequent and amicable encounters between Indians and Americans along the overland trail serves to break the binary of violence that has been repeatedly discredited. Violence on the overland migrations was not a common occurrence and therefore it is not an informative way to frame the issues of inter-ethnic interactions between Indians and American emigrants. Instead, a focus on common, mundane interactions between different groups of people is a more cogent framework for exploring the complex issues of American Indian history, and the larger history of the American West.

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