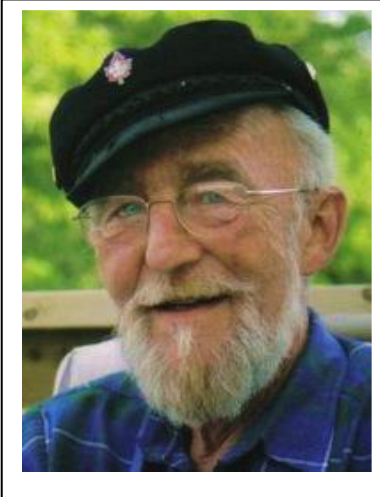


The Family Historian
Patrick Wohler

Column #189



Westward ho!

Readers' queries really light up my day and this was especially true with one from Ruth Chapin in Smiths Falls.

She had an ancestor who was living in Joplin, Missouri for whom she could find no death record in either Missouri or Colorado where the family later moved. She was able to pin down the period of the death to between 1878 and 1880 and there was a family story that he had worked on wagon trains moving settlers west and had died in an accident on the trail.

This is quite believable because at that time two major wagon train routes originated in Independence Mo. If a written record was made of the death it might have been at one of the forts or stopping places along the way.

The Santa Fe Trail was the oldest wagon trail in westward expansion. Individual wagon companies traveled on their own for about 240km to Council Grove, Kansas where they joined with others for the 1100km trek to Santa Fe. The major posts that it passed through were Fort Larned, Kan. and Bent's Fort at La Hunta, Colo. before reaching Santa Fe. The journey usually took between six and eight weeks.

The Santa Fe Trail became obsolete when the railway reached Santa Fe in 1880 but it was always more of a commercial route than a migration one so it is perhaps more likely that the ancestor worked on the famed Oregon Trail.

This trail opened in 1841 and was heavily used until 1884 when Oregon was linked to the Union Pacific Railway. It was a long (3500km), arduous and dangerous journey that took five to six months. About 400,000 brave souls traveled the route and estimates place the death toll at 34,000 which is about 10 people per kilometer.

The major posts along the route where travelers could obtain supplies, rest and repair their wagons were Fort Kearney, Neb. where the trail blended with the Mormon and California Trails, Forts Laramie and Bridger in Wyo., Soda Springs and Fort Boise, Id. and The Dalles, Ore.

The hazards of the trail included sickness, accident and (after 1860) Indian raids. Accidents were by far the leading cause of fatalities and an astonishing number of people were run over by their wagons. People who died on the trail were buried beside it and sometimes their graves would be marked by a simple board inscribed with their name.

The Oregon-California Trails Association has researched these graves and published a book, *Graves and Sites of the Oregon and California Trails*. It is available from their office at PO Box 1019, Independence Missouri, 64051 at a cost of US\$17.95. They also have a website at <http://www.octa-trails.org/>.

Two other websites with good information about these trails are <http://www.americanwest.com/trails/> and freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~gentutor/facts.html.

This is a fascinating chapter in American history.

Wired genealogy

The Ontario Genealogical Society will hold its annual conference this year at Fanshawe College in London, Ontario May 30-June 1.

The schedule includes 10 workshops and 36 sessions to choose from, most of them with an internet or computer theme. The line-up of speakers reads like a who's who of genealogy and it should be a terrific conference.

There is accommodation available in the student residences with ample parking. For full details and registration information you can visit the conference website at www.ogs.on.ca/conference.