

The Preacher Train

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In addition to his position at the Talent Historical Society he is related to at least seven families who crossed the plains to Oregon prior to 1854. In November 2013 he was asked to prepare a speech for a meeting of the Talent Historical Society. He shares the following:

While reading Yvonne Reynold's book about the history of Talent, I suddenly realized that many of the old pioneer families, those folk whose donation land claims dot the Wagner Creek valley, had all been on the same wagon train that my own great grandfather Martin Burt and his family joined to come to Oregon from Wisconsin in 1853. They, and many of the old settlers of Talent, had come west with what has become known as the "Preacher Train" because so many preachers came to Southern Oregon on that same wagon train. However, my Burt pioneers settled east of Roseburg, passing through the Bear Creek Valley in late August of 1853.

There were five preachers on that wagon train. Three were members of the Royal family: the father William Royal, his two sons—Thomas Fletcher Royal and J. H. B. Royal—all Methodists. Stephen Phelps Taylor, also a Methodist who became the first minister in Phoenix, Oregon. The fifth minister was a Baptist—the Rev. John Stearns, who at 76 years of age, joined his sons and daughters for the move to Oregon in 1853. Incidentally, it was thought that no one over the age of 45 should attempt the trip to Oregon over the plains because they would most likely die on the way west. However, John Stearns lived until 1870 and died at the age of 92 and is buried in the Stearns cemetery up Wagner Creek...a cemetery named after his son David Stearns. Another Stearns preacher was

As the train came west across the plains, the preachers refused to travel on Sunday. This is what Dr. Osman Royal, one of William Royal's sons said about that decision:

"The company with which [my father] started did not think of staying in camp on Sunday, and when he announced his intentions of not traveling on that day, he was laughed at; and told that when he got in the Indian country, he would get over that. However, he remained true to his God and to his convictions of right and wrong, and rested himself and teams on the Lord's day, and usually on the following Tuesday, he would overtake his company. When they arrived in the country where there was danger from the Indians, he was besought not to be so reckless as to stay behind, but he told them no.

At places there were notices of "Look out for the Indians!" They also saw many traces of these murderous savages, but nothing daunted this man who persevered in his resolve not to travel on Sunday, and the result proved the correctness of his course, as he arrived first in Oregon, with his teams in better condition than the others."

Incidentally, my great grandfather Martin Burt was subsequently asked to testify to accusations that had been placed with the Methodist church officials back East about this situation, and wrote supporting the action taken by the Rev. William Royal. The fact that those of the "Preacher Train" who followed Rev. Royal's lead, arrived in the Talent area on August 31, 1853, while those who sought to hurry and travel on Sunday straggled in ten to fifteen days later.

I have been trying to determine exactly who was on the "Preacher Train." So far I have discovered that the wagon master was William Hurst Rockfellow, from Muscatine County, Iowa. That county lies next to the Mississippi River on the far southeastern corner of Iowa. Incidentally, my own great grandfather Samuel Casebeer was from Cedar County, Iowa, which lies just north of Muscatine County. He came out to Oregon in 1851, however.

In 1849 William Rockfellow, in company with his brothers, Albert. G. Rockfellow and George Rockfellow, left any family members with their father and went to California to find gold. William returned to Iowa and in the spring of 1853 brought his family across the plains to Wagner Creek where his two brothers had settled. A. G. Rockfellow took a land claim where the huge new Shakespeare costume and set building is being erected here in Talent, and his brother George took a claim right across from his brother on the east side of what today is Talent Avenue, then the Applegate Trail. The yellow house that stands at the corner of Rapp Road and Talent Avenue, was not built by A. G. Rockfellow, but it is built on what was his land claim. Incidentally, A. G. Rockfellow is the man who laid out the pioneer toll road over the Siskiyou pass to the Klamath River and Yreka.

I have identified about forty individuals who were on the so-called "Preacher Train" :

The Rockfellow family; William Hurst Rockfellow, wife Harriet ` Angeline Hendrix, daughter Alice Rockfellow,--they had more children but only Alice was on the Preacher Train.

The Royal family: William, wife Barbara, sons Thomas Fletcher Royal,

J. H. B. Royal, and one daughter whose name I have yet to locate.

George Ebey, who was Barbara Royal's nephew, and another nephew William M. Sells.

Thomas Fletcher Royal had a wife Mary Ann, and started west with two children; however just after crossing Fandango Pass in the Warner Mountains south of Lakeview, Oregon, Mary Ann who had walked nine miles down the mountains to Goose Lake, while pregnant, had a baby boy which they named Miller after captain of a group of soldiers apparently from Yreka who hearing of the group came out to escort the Preacher Train members through Modoc Indian territory. By the way Miller G. Royal, as a grown man became a principal of what became the Southern Oregon Normal School in Ashland, now Southern Oregon University.

The Taylor families: There were two Taylor families, one of whom I have found much more data about than the other. The one best recorded is the family of the Rev. Stephen Phelps Taylor, the Methodist minister who settled at Phoenix, at that time usually whimsically called Gassburg. Hobart Taylor, the son of the Rev. Taylor in 1861 became one of the soldiers at Camp Baker, and is the author of the only diary known to have been written about service at that fort, which had been built to allow the Union soldiers there to keep an watchful eye on secessionist Jacksonville.

The Beeson family: John Beeson, his wife Ann Welborn, and his son Welborn Beeson. Their hired men: Henry Church, Alex Sanford and the Loughlin brothers William and Judson.

Three other men were also with the wagon train: a man named John Owens, a Swede named Laurence Johnstone, and a Frenchman named Batis.

Welborn Beeson mentions the following people in his diary of the trip west with the Preacher Train: Ferdinand Styker, a Dutchman; Jim Logan, Liman Gilliland, Albert Willis, David Forte, James Story, Tom Whiple, Will Ross, Austin Rice and Charlie Wood. However, it was not until May 25, 1853, that the Beesons joined the William Rockfellow-led wagon train on the Platte River. Others mentioned by Welborn Beeson in his diary are James Riley, a Mr and Mrs. Willits, an old Mr. Long, James Mills, and Mr. Frick . Charles Hepp was with the Beeson group on June 126, 1853, before he was killed by a man named Gregory.

Others named by Welborn are James Morehead and Peter Mahon.

The Oatman family who settled in Phoenix were members on the Rockfellow-led wagon train.

The Scott family of three men, a wife and five children joined the train on the Humboldt River in what is now Nevada in July 1853.

The Robison family: The Robisons arrived on 30 August 1853 here in the Wagner Creek valley. The Robisons included Samuel McMillin Robison, his wife Hannah Elizabeth, his daughter Joanna Robison [the wife of Matthew Warren Morrison], John Francis Robison and his wife Susan Milligan and their two sons Joseph T., and Robert Boyd Robison.

The Burt family from whom I am descended included the patriarch Martin Burt, born in Westmoreland, New Hampshire, orphaned at eight, although his mother remarried. Lived in Marlboro, Vermont until 1810. In 1815 at age 32, he visited Batavia, New York where he met and married his cousin Abigail Temple O'Flyng. The couple raised ten children to adulthood, two others dying as infants. In 1816, Martin decided to seek a new home on the Western praries beyond the Mississipi River. He settled in Missouri in 1818 but found he could not live there with safety to himself and family due to his life-long principles of liberty for the downtrodden. [He could not stand slavery.] He moved his family to Greenfield, Green County, Illinois, then in 1839 to a place near Whitewater, Wisconsin. The Burts lived in Wisconsin until 1852, moving back to Greenfield that winter, leaving for what turned out to be Douglas County, Oregon in 1853 as one of members of William Rockfellow's "Preacher Train." The Burt family included

Martin Burt, wife Abigail O'Flyng, daughters Lavina, Amanda, my great grandmother Ellen, Amarantha, Abigail, Minerva, and Sophrenia; and the sons Omar, Aaron, and Cyrus,

As near as I can count, if all this data is correct, and so far I think it is, a total of 81 people came to or through Jackson County via the William Hurst Rockfellow-led "Preacher Train." Immediately after they arrived on August 30, 1853, another wagon train of sixty wagons entered the Bear Creek Valley coming to Oregon on the Applegate Trail and moving through Talent and its fort. Incidentally, the Robisons up Wagner Creek built their own personal palisade fort for their eight family members. The only other fort in Jackson County was on the Birdseye claim at the mouth of Footh Creek.

The "Preacher Train" travelers were basically the basis of the early population of both Phoenix and Talent, then known as the Eden Precinct.