

Finding tiny pieces of the ancient puzzle

Digging for the roots of family trees

By Monty Young

When Marjorie Maderator decided to research her roots, she probably had no idea of the drama and hardship, the hope and heartbreak, the suffering and triumph that she would uncover.

The high drama is concealed in the dry and dusty pages of death notices, donation land claim records and the fly leaves of old family bibles. It takes a patient, different researcher to find the facts and bring them out into the light of the present day.

As Marjorie got more involved with her work, the lives of her ancestors must have taken shape before her. The records of the Turnbow side of her family, for instance, took her on an odyssey that stretched back from Oregon through Arkansas, Missouri, Tennessee, and finally to South Carolina.

When John Jeremiah and Ruth Turnbow left Arkansas in the spring of 1852, they had a tremendous responsibility. In their party they had their three children, plus John's nine children from his first marriage to Mary Stahon. They were setting out on a 2,200-mile trek across prairies, deserts, and steep, high mountains.

In addition to the 12 children, Ruth's parents and her brothers and sisters joined the party. However, Oregon records only account for eight of John Turnbow's 12 children living in Oregon. This might not seem very significant until we stop to consider where written by Judge Delazon Smith to the *Portland Times* in 1852.

The judge wrote: "There are perhaps four to a more fresh graves between the Missouri River and The Dalles of the Columbia, and if the mortality has been so great on the California route, 12 or 14 persons of this year's migration are dead."

As a St. Turnbow of Eugene once stated in his book that two of John's older children may have married and

remained in Arkansas. He had also written that two children died while crossing the Blue Mountains.

If this is the case, John Turnbow was fortunate to have lost only two out of the 12 children that he fathered during his lifetime. The Turnbow family's deaths matched the 12 to 14 percent figure that the judge gave. Maybe they even considered themselves lucky to have lost only two children.

Infant mortality in the nineteenth century was high; death could snatch people away at any age, and often did. Today we can't even remember such diseases as cholera and diphtheria. Tuberculosis, once a plague that often wiped out families, has been brought under control. In the nineteenth century, these killers were every day occurrences.

Sometimes not only the territory but the Indians, who called the western plains their home, were hostile. In 1913 the Junction City newspaper ran an article about the reminiscences of John's son, George W. Turnbow, who was a teenager during the trip west. George recalled that the party lost ten head of cattle to invading Indians in

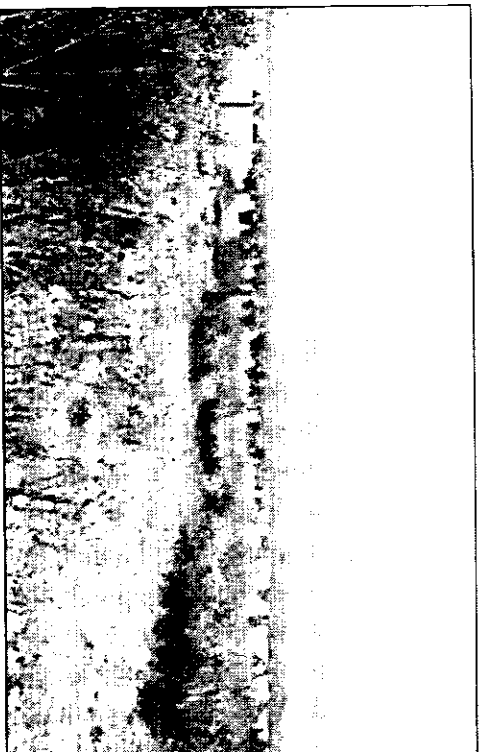
western Nebraska.

By 1852, the game animals were probably gone from the areas surrounding the Oregon trail, and Indians would have been desperate for food. The second largest migration in recorded history (the largest is said to have been the children of Israel leaving Egypt) must have swept the country-side bare of anything that was edible.

The difficulty of the trip is underscored by the fact that horses weren't handy enough to make the trip; the immigrants' wagons were drawn by slow plodding oxen.

The oxen covered 15 to 20 miles on good level land. The wagons were packed closely up with the immigrants' belongings, so able-bodied people walked beside the wagons. At a pace of two miles an hour, this gave the immigrants anywhere from eight to 10 hours of walking each day. Today, how many of us walk for more than a mile or two once or twice a week?

Soon after arriving in Oregon in the fall of 1852, John Jeremiah Turnbow received notice of his appointment to the post of United States marshal. During the winter of 1852, however, he



This street was part of the Turnbow Donation Land Claim of 1854

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William Clarence (Jaggy) Turnbow, grandson of George W. Turnbow, helping 4-H kids with their sheep (1975)

died, either in Portland or The Dalles. He was 44 years old.

John's third son, George Washington Turnbow, was 19 years old when his father died. His stepmother married Charles Lawrence in 1854. The Turnbow children had now lost both their natural parents.

Apparently the mixed family didn't get along well. In 1854 George and his elder brother, William, left the Lawrence household, taking two of their younger siblings with them.

William had been the first of the Turnbows to come to Oregon; his wanderlust drove him until, like so many wanderers, he was too old to travel. In 1854 he took a donation land claim near Junction City, which he abandoned the following spring.

In 1860, William was in Jackson County, where he gave his occupation as miner. In 1868 he married Elizabeth Keith in Josephine County. By 1880 he was back in the Long Tom precinct.

Historical accounts say he was a railroad man, and sometimes worked in construction. He was a veteran of the 1855 Rogue River Indian Wars.

In the meantime, George stayed in Lacle County, where he improved his land claim. In the spring of 1862, he married Ellen Robinson. Ellen died in childbirth in 1873. She was 26 years old, and had given birth to seven children.

All of the children were placed with family and neighbors; George's whereabouts are unknown for some time after the death of his wife. Four of the seven children survived to adulthood.

In 1854 when George Turnbow took up his first donation land claim, he wasn't able to sign his name. Sometime between that time and February 24, 1910, when he wrote a check to Maude Hays in the amount of three dollars, he had learned to read and write.

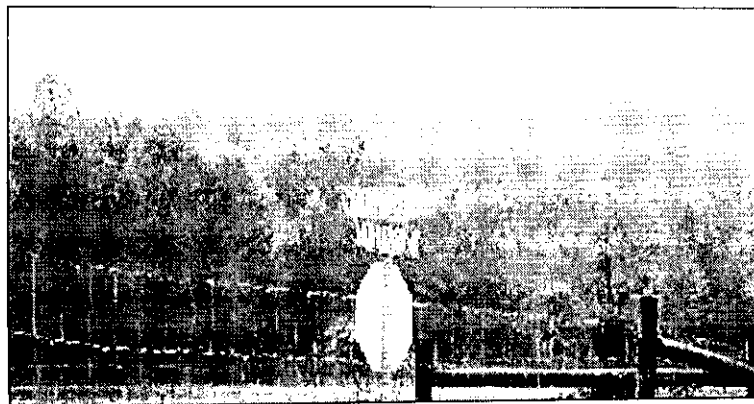
Did George learn from his wife, or did his children bring the knowledge home from the Union school? Wouldn't it be nice to know? Unfortunately, we probably never will know that, nor many other details of the toil-filled lives these people lived.

George never remarried. He died on September 25, 1922, at the age of 88. He suffered from gangrene, and probably had Type II diabetes. He was buried in the Union Cemetery, not far from his Donation Land Claim.

When we start thinking about those pioneers, we have more questions than answers. One question gives birth to another: Will our descendants know how we lived? Video cameras tell some scant details, but how many of us have written even the sketchiest autobiographies?

It would be nice to know that this series of articles on the early settlers has inspired some readers to write down the stories of their early lives. Some day your children, your grandchildren, and descendants not yet born will be fascinated by your stories.

They'll learn there was a time when our electricity came to us over wires, and people known as linemen went out in the wind, the cold and the rain to repair the damage done to those wires by winter storms. They'll learn that their ancestors didn't have that tiny fuel cell in the utility room, and they'll wonder how we ever survived such hardships. ■



Turnbow Lane was named for the pioneer family.