There have been several fictional stories and books written about the Sager family. These fictional accounts generally have been accepted as truth. The following is a brief factual account of the Sager story. A more complete, accurate account can be found in both SHALLOW GRAVE AT WAIILATPU by Thompson and STOUT HEARTED SEVEN by Frazier.

In the spring of 1844, Henry Sager packed his family and goods aboard a covered wagon and headed for the fabled land of Oregon. The Sager wagon joined the others of the emigrant train of that year and slowly the caravan pushed westward from Missouri. Mrs. Sager, already the mother of six youngsters and expecting her seventh, was not at all excited about going to the far West. She had already moved from Virginia to Ohio, then to Indiana, then to Missouri, in order to please her restless husband. Now she dreaded the thought of crossing the Rockies and making the long hazardous trip to the Pacific.

At the outset, the daily routine of breaking camp and moving the wagons into line was quickly established. But just as quickly, the Sager family was beset with difficult problems. Soon after starting out, Mrs. Sager presented her husband with a baby girl. While the mother was still regaining her strength, disaster fell upon nine year old Catherine, the oldest of the girls.

At Fort Laramie, Catherine caught her dress on an axe handle when she started to climb out of the moving wagon. She fell under the big moving wheels and her leg was broken in several places. Mr. Sager set Catherine’s leg and did such a good job that Catherine had only a slight limp after it healed.

For the moment, however, the wagon box must have resembled an ambulance, with
Mrs. Sager, the new baby, and Catherine all suffering from the jolts and bumps of the trail.

Yet, Catherine’s accident had one good result. It brought Dr. Dagon into the lives of the Sagers. Dr. Dagon arrived after the leg had been set and checked the break. His help was to become even more important as the wagons moved westward. By the time the emigrants reached South Pass, the gateway through the Rocky Mountains, Henry Sager was seriously ill with fever. His health steadily grew worse despite Dr. Dagon’s treatment. By the time the old fur rendezvous of Green River was reached, the Sagers sorrowfully buried their father’s body beside the stream.

The train had gone too far west for the Sagers to consider turning back to Missouri. Despite the fears of the unknown future, it was easier for the family to go on with the rest of the wagons. Mrs. Sager, not yet fully recovered from child birth and mourning her departed husband, now had all the responsibility for the seven children. She was not alone, however, because Captain William Shaw, who was the leader of that section of the wagon train, and Dr. Dagon made sure that the family was cared for. The doctor climbed into the wagon seat and drove the oxen the rest of the way to Oregon.

Slowly, the wagons lumbered along the Snake River and slowly, too, Mrs. Sager sank beneath the cares and sicknesses that hung on her. Overcome by illness, despair, and grief, she was not able to regain her health. She finally became delirious, and as Catherine sadly wrote, “at times perfectly insane.” In the vicinity of present day Twin Falls, Idaho, Mrs. Sager said good bye to her children. She asked Dr. Dagon to take care of the orphans until they were safely in the hands of Dr. Marcus Whitman, the well known missionary in the Walla Walla Valley of what is now south-eastern Washington. Sorrowfully, the emigrants buried Mrs. Sager’s body. The grief stricken children numbly climbed into the wagon, and Dr. Dagon guided the oxen toward the setting sun. The two boys, John 13 and Francisco 12, were old enough to take care of themselves. But the five girls, Catherine 9, Elizabeth 7, Matilda 5, Hannah Louise 3, and the new baby, needed the care of adults. Despite large families of their own, the women of the wagon train opened their hearts to the orphans and spared what time they could in taking care of the little girls. Several women on the train nursed the baby, so that it survived the weeks that lay ahead of them. This was only the second year that emigrants had taken their wagons all the way to the Columbia. Dr. Dagon, although he immensely enjoyed driving the wagon which had by now been reduced to a two-wheeled cart, was not particularly skilled in driving oxen over the treacherous trail of the lower Snake River. Perched on top of the cart, he urged the oxen on by swearing loudly when he thought that would help. The girls, crowded behind him, had been taught by their parents that swearing was not proper. Every time the doctor uttered an oath, one of the girls would promptly kick him in the broad seat of his trousers to remind him of their presence.

In late October, 1844, the cart pulled into the yard of the Whitman Mission at Waiilatpu. Captain Shaw, who had ridden on ahead to alert the missionaries asked Mrs. Whitman to come outside and see her new children. When Narcissa Whitman ran out to greet the
dirty, barefoot orphans, her eyes saw a pitiful sight. Dr. Dagon, his work of father and
mother now ended, stood to one side of the cart. Emotion showed strongly on his face
as Narcissa murmured soft words of compassion for the ragged, little girls. The two
boys, overcome by weariness and relief, began to sob. Catherine, with her crippled leg,
also broke into tears, and the smaller children stood dumbfounded and afraid, not
knowing what would happen next.

The seven orphans had found a new home. Years later, the three oldest girls were to
recall many times the loving care of the Whitmans. They were to remember too, that
their survival through the wilderness was due largely to the unselfishness of Captain
Shaw, Dr. Dagon, and the unnamed pioneer woman. Years later, Catherine wrote, “We
were all taken care of by the company. There was not one but that would share their
bread with us.”

In July of the next year, Dr. Whitman obtained a court order in Oregon Territory which
gave him legal custody of the children “until further arrangements could be made.” But
for all practical purposes, the Whitmans had found seven children and the Sager
orphans had found a father and mother.

Three years after their arrival, in 1847, the Sager children again were orphaned when
Marcus and Narcissa Whitman lost their lives when the Cayuse attacked the mission.
The two Sager boys, John and Francisco, were also killed. While a captive of the
Indians, little Hannah Louise died from sickness. The four surviving girls, after their
ransom from the Indians by the Hudson’s Bay Company, were moved to the Willamette
Valley in western Oregon where the American settlements were centered.

Years later, the three older girls, Catherine, Elizabeth, and Matilda, were to write and
speak often of the trip westward and the events at Waiilatpu. They gave high praise to
Captain Shaw, the wagon master; Dr. Dagon, who had befriended them; the emigrant
women; and, of course, Dr. Marcus Whitman and his wife, Narcissa.

Appraisal of the estate of Henry Sager delivered to Marcus Whitman by Wm.
Shaw on the 6th of Nov. 1844

3 yoke of oxen at @50 per yoke----------150.00
The fore wheels of one wagon---------------13.00
One cow-----------------------------------37.50
One odd steer-----------------------------29.00
One cow (excluding five dollars expended
in procuring her from the Indians)----------20.00
3 chains and two yokes--------------------10.00
1 ax-------------------------------------2.00
1 screw plate-----------------------------3.00

Total-------------------------------------262.50 (sic)
June 25, 1845

Benjamin Nichols
Solomon Eads
Com. B. Magruder

Narcissa’s Children

Alice Clarissa Whitman
Whitman’s own daughter born March 14, 1837 (born on Narcissa’s twenty-ninth birthday). First white girl born to American parents west of the Rockies. Tragically, Alice Clarissa drowned in the Walla Walla River on June 23, 1839, at age two years and three months.

Helen Mar Meek
Half-Indian daughter of Joe Meek, mountain man. She was left with the Whitmans in September, 1840 at age 2. Helen was 9 years old when she died of the measles in December, 1847 (during the captivity after the killings).

Mary Ann Bridger
Jim Bridger’s daughter was six years old when she arrived at the mission in August or September, 1841. She was the second child accepted by the Whitmans. Like Helen Mar Meek, she too was the daughter of an Indian woman.

David Malin
Spanish-Indian boy, between two and three years old when brought to the mission on March 2, 1842 by two Indian women. Narcissa named him David Malin after a close friend from Franklin Academy. He was the third child accepted by the Whitmans.

Perrin Whitman
Marcus’ nephew, who was 13 when he returned with Marcus Whitman to Waiilatpu from Rushville, New York in 1843.

Sager Children
On October 17, 1844, the orphaned Sager children arrived at Waiilatpu. Ages at the time of arrival at Waillatpu were:
1. John—14 (killed during Whitman Killings)
2. Francis—12 (killed during Whitman Killings)
3. Catherine—10
4. Elizabeth——8
5. Matilda Jane—6
6. Hannah Louise—3 (died of measles on December 5 after Killings)
7. Henrietta——5 months
The best known of the children the Whitmans took into their home were the seven orphaned Sager children. Much has been written about the Sagers. The surviving Sager girls wrote their reminiscences in their later years about their lives with the Whitmans. Much of the following text has been taken from Catherine Sager Pringle's memories. Catherine was 12 years old when she left Whitman Mission.

School usually opened in late October or early November and lasted five or six months. The children were in school from Monday morning until Saturday noon. Saturday afternoon was a half-day holiday and, if the weather was good, after preparing for the sabbath Mrs. Whitman would take the children out to ramble over the hills, or they would be provided “amusement” in the house. The Whitmans believed in children getting plenty of exercise.

The Sabbath was strictly observed. Preparations were made the day before and perfect stillness pervaded the house on Sabbath morning. In the winter, a Bible class was held on Saturday night. A subject was given to the children to prove from the Bible. Chapters were read from the Bible, each child reading a verse and giving his thoughts on it. The class closed by singing hymns.

On Sabbath morning each child was reminded that it was Sabbath and they kept still. Each one sat down with his or her books until breakfast. Those who could not read were provided with pictures. After breakfast they were dressed for Sunday school at 11:00 a.m.. Lessons consisted of eleven verses a week. The older ones were given notes and expositions to read on the lesson Sabbath morning. The time until 3:00 p.m. was spent in reading. At 3:00 p.m. they assembled to worship. Dr. Whitman read a sermon and the children were expected to remember the text. Sometimes they would be asked to tell or recite parts of it. The evening was spent in reading. Dr. Whitman used this time to teach the commandments. A prayer meeting was held on Thursday night.

Marcus Whitman always hired someone to do the housework in the winter so as to give the children all the time to devote to their studies. In the summer, Mrs. Whitman and the girls did it. The forenoon was devoted to housework. Girls would go to the river all summer long for bathing every day before dinner. They frequently slept outside in the summer. The boys slept outside all summer.

Mrs. Whitman and the girls spent a lot of time rambling over the country in quest of flowers. Mrs. Whitman was interested in botany and she taught them the love of flowers. They each had a flower garden which they had to weed and care for. In the spring, they all spent their time in the garden planting. This done, they had the time to themselves to spend as they pleased. Sometimes the boys would bring the horses up for riding. At other times they would accompany the doctor in his visits to see the sick in the Indian lodges. Occasionally, they would pack a lunch and go on a picnic in the hills. Mrs. Whitman amused the girls with anecdotes and at the same time distributed pieces of
calico to show them how to make rag dolls. Rag dolls were pieces of cloth rolled up with eyes, nose and mouth marked on it with a pen. Helen Mar Meek and Mary Ann Bridger would take pieces of board or a stick and carry it around on their backs for a baby, so Narcissa taught them to make rag dolls.

Elizabeth Sager had an Indian papoose doll given her by an Indian woman, bound up and dressed in deerskin on a papoose board. The hair was wool from a black sheep and the eyes were trade beads. Mrs. Whitman also gave each of them a string of beads to wear, with the understanding that the one who misbehaved had to return the beads to her. The doctor and his wife were strict disciplinarians. Mrs. Whitman was an excellent singer and she immediately began teaching the children to use their voices.

Their manner of living was very simple. Their meat in the winter was beef, and in the summer mutton and fish. Pork was seldom served. Unbolted flour, instead of fine flour, was used along with cornmeal. Tea and coffee were rare. The country abounded in wild fruits and a good garden supplied them with vegetables. Cakes and pastry were made only on holidays. There was, however, plenty of milk, butter and cheese.

Then came wash day at the Waiilatpu Mission. As early as 4:00 a.m. the help were led into the kitchen by Mrs. Whitman. Tubs and barrels were produced, with all the washing apparatus used on such occasions. The men and boys, with long aprons tied around them, brought water while the women washed and rubbed. Merry jokes passed freely and all went off in good humor. By school time, which was 9:00 a.m., the clothes were on the line. Wash day was fun for everyone.

The site at the Mission was rather unhealthy because of the evaporation of the alkaline ponds that lay around the place in the spring, and also by the close proximity of the Millpond. The children tended to be more or less afflicted with fever and sickness during the warm season.