

THE FLIGHT OF THE OSBORNS

Excerpted from *Marcus and Narcissa Whitman and the Opening of Old Oregon* by Clifford M. Drury. The Osborn family consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Josiah Osborn and their three children: Nancy age 7 ½; John age 4; and Alexander age 2.

The Osborn family had a harrowing experience in their flight from Waiilatpu to Fort Walla Walla. While hiding under the floor of the Indian room, they had heard the shooting of Mrs. Whitman, Andrew Rodgers, and Francis Sager, and had heard the dying groans of Rodgers until late in the evening. Even though Mrs. Osborn had only that day arisen from her sick bed and even though their four-year-old son, John, just recovering from the measles, was too weak to do much walking, the Osborns decided on making the attempt to get to the Fort. There was no other way than to walk the twenty-five miles.

According to Nancy's recollections, they left about ten o'clock that Monday night. Groping their way through the darkness of the Indian room, they searched for some clothing, blankets, and food. "We could find but little," wrote Nancy, "and did not linger long." (91) Osborn wrote: "Taking John Law on my back, and A[lexander] Rogers in my arms, we started. The first step outside was in the blood of an orphan boy [Francis Sager]." According to Nancy, they struck out across the field to the confluence of Mill Creek with the Walla Walla River. The night was dark as a half moon did not rise until about midnight. (92)

Osborn recalled: "We could see no trail and not even the hand before the face. We had to feel out the trail with our feet. My wife almost fainted but staggered along." (93) In addition to carrying his two sons, Osborn also had to carry some of the bedding and some provisions. No doubt the little girl helped, but Mrs. Osborn was too weak to assist.

When they came to the ford across the Walla Walla River, they found the water waist deep and icy cold. Osborn had to cross five times, to take each of the little boys, his nine-year-old daughter, and finally his wife to the other side. Of this last trip, he wrote: "My wife, in her great weakness, came near washing down, but held to my clothes, I

bracing myself with a stick.” Only the great fear of being killed prompted them to stagger on. After traveling about two miles, Mrs. Osborn fainted. Since they could go no further, they lay down in the mud among some willows. When daylight came, they could hear Indians coming and going on the trail that paralleled the river. The temperature was near freezing. All of Tuesday was spent in hiding and later Osborn wrote: “The day seemed a week.”

On Tuesday night, November 30, they continued their slow journey. Now they left the bank of the river with its tangle of willows and shrubbery and ventured to walk on the trail. Several small streams had to be waded. After only a few hours of walking, Mrs. Osborn fainted again. Of their misery that night, Osborn wrote: “[We] crawled into the brush and frozen mud, to shake and suffer from hunger and cold without sleep. The children, too, wet and cold, called incessantly for food, but the shock [i.e., the memory] of groans and yells at first so frightened them that they did not speak loud.”

Another day was spent in hiding. When Wednesday night came, Mrs. Osborn was too weak to stand. She urged her husband to take one of the boys and go to the fort for help. They were then at least fifteen miles from their destination. At first Osborn rejected any suggestion of leaving his wife and the children, but she insisted. Finally he agreed to go, as this seemed to be the only possible way all might be saved. Taking John with him, whom he had to carry, Osborn started for Fort Walla Walla. Since Osborn also had had the measles, he found it necessary to rest frequently. He arrived at the fort early Thursday morning, December 2, and to his dismay was given a cool reception by McBean.

In a letter sent to relatives in the States dated the following April 7, when memories were still fresh, Osborn wrote of McBean: “He gave me about a half pint of tea, and two small biscuits. When we had got warm, I asked for assistance to bring in my family, but was unable to procure any.” (94) Since McBean had sent his interpreter, Bushman, with news of the massacre to Fort Vancouver, he had only two hired men with him besides the two priests. By Thursday morning, McBean had learned of the dispatch of two

bands of Indians—one to Lapwai to kill Spalding if he could be found; the other to The Dalles to inflict a like fate on Perrin Whitman and others who might be at that mission. Without a doubt, McBean was frightened at the possibility of the Cayuses attacking Fort Walla Walla, especially if they learned that he was harboring one of the Americans and his family who had escaped from Wailatpu. This seems to be the only rational explanation for McBean's inhospitality to both Hall and Osborn. He was made craven by his fear of an attack by the murdering Cayuses.

Osborn's account continues: "[I] begged Mr. McBean for horses to get my family, for food, blankets and clothing to take to them, and to take care of my little child till I could bring my family to his fort. Mr. Hall had come in on Monday night, but he could not have an American in his fort, and he had put him over the Columbia River; that he could not let me have horses, or anything for my wife and children, and I must go to Umatilla." In other words, McBean was trying to get Osborn and his family to seek refuge with the Catholic missionaries at the newly established Saint Anne Mission.

Osborn's account of his reception by McBean raises serious doubts as to the truthfulness of McBean's account of Hall's disappearance in his letter to the *Walla Walla Statesman* in 1866, to which reference has been made. We have no way of learning how Hall felt about McBean's alleged insistence that he continue his journey to The Dalles. Bancroft, in his *Oregon*, gives this judgment: "McBean was 'below the salt' when compared with other gentlemen in the company." (95)

After McBean's adamant refusal to provide horses and supplies or to receive Osborn and his family if they could have managed to get to the fort, Osborn in his desperation appealed to the priests: "I next begged the priests to show pity, as my wife and children must perish, and the Indians would undoubtedly kill me, but with no better success. I then begged to leave my child, who was now safe in the fort, but they refused." As guests of McBean, the priests found themselves placed in an embarrassing situation. Evidently they agreed with McBean's proposal that Osborn take his family to Saint Anne's Mission on the Umatilla.

At this opportune moment, when Osborn's every plea for help had been rejected, Stanley and Solomon arrived at the fort. No doubt McBean was appalled to have still another American seeking refuge in his undermanned post. There were, however, some extenuating circumstances which made Stanley's presence more acceptable than Osborn's. Stanley had not fled from troubled Waiilatpu and hence had not been involved in the events which had occurred there. Moreover, he had led a hostile Cayuse to believe that he was an Englishman. Finally, in case of an attack, here was another man who could shoot a gun.

RESCUE OF THE OSBORN FAMILY

As soon as Stanley arrived, Osborn turned to him with his frantic appeal for help. Stanley's response was immediate and sympathetic. After having spent more than a day and a night in hiding in fear for his own safety, he could understand Osborn's concern. Stanley offered the use of his two horses and also gave Osborn some food and clothing. Osborn, greatly relieved, then asked if Solomon could go with him as he felt the need for a guide, and someone to help him. Stanley, however, declined this request as he felt the urgency of sending Solomon back to Tshimakain with word of the massacre as soon as possible in order to put the missionaries there on guard.

McBean, seeing that there was a good probability of Osborn finding his family and bringing them to the fort, then offered to provide a Walla Walla Indian guide with the distinct understanding that if Osborn were able to find them, he should take them to the Umatilla mission. McBean even specified that if he could not find them, then Osborn himself was to go to the Umatilla. Osborn, in his letter of April 7, 1848, said that one of the priests gave him a letter of introduction to Bishop Blanchet. Osborn had no alternative but to accept McBean's terms, as he needed the Indian guide to help him find his family.

Osborn wanted to leave his son, John Law, at the fort and Stanley expressed his willingness to care for the boy, but McBean refused.(96) Fearful of being seen by the watchful Cayuses, Osborn, his son, and the guide did not set out on their search until nightfall that Thursday evening, December 2. Since he had left his family during darkness and since the terrain was strange to him, Osborn had difficulty in locating them. He dared not shout for fearing of being discovered by hostile Indians. The whole night was spent in a fruitless, frustrating search. Friday morning dawned. In desperation Osborn continued looking for his family in the daylight. Early that morning, to the great joy and relief of all, they were found.

Osborn wrote that they had “almost perished with hunger and thirst.” While the Walla Walla Indian went for water, Osborn gave them food. As soon as possible, Osborn helped his wife mount one of the horses, and after dividing the children among the three, they started for the Umatilla mission. They had not gone more than a couple of miles before they met an armed Cayuse who threatened to kill Osborn. The Walla Walla Indian shamed the Cayuse by asking if he would “kill an old man that was sick, with a sick wife and children?” The Cayuse put down his gun and allowed them to proceed. He warned Osborn, however, that he would surely be killed if he attempted to go to the Umatilla. Osborn then decided, regardless of the promises he had given to McBean, that he would return to Fort Walla Walla.

Just when the family arrived at this destination is not clear, possibly on Saturday morning, if Osborn had felt it prudent to go into hiding the rest of Friday. When the Osborns arrived at the gate for admission, McBean at first refused to admit them. Mrs. Osborn said that she would “die at the gate, but she would not leave.” Reluctantly, McBean admitted them and provided a room where they could stay. Osborn wrote: “We had hardly got warm before McBean came to me and wanted me to leave my family with him, and go down to the valley by myself; but I refused to leave the fort and would not go.” It is also reported that McBean provided blankets only after Osborne had signed a promissory note in payment. (97) The Osborns remained at the fort until all the captives were released and then accompanied them down the river to the Willamette

Valley during the first week of January. Shortly after their arrival in the Valley, four-year-old John Law died. The exposure he suffered, no doubt, was a contributory cause of his death.

In his letter of April 7, 1848, to which reference has been made, Osborn recounted the terrifying experiences through which he and his family had passed and told of the death of his three children, including the baby who died the day she was born. He ruefully recalled how happy he and his family had been in the Willamette Valley before Dr. Whitman had persuaded him in the late summer of 1847 to accept work at Waiilatpu. "Not being satisfied with doing well," he wrote, "I consented to go."

Footnotes:

91. See ante, fn. 73 of this chapter. [73. From an interview with Elizabeth Sager Helm, *W.C.Q.*, I (1897):2:22.]
92. Philip Fox, once Director of Adler Planetarium, Chicago, in a letter to me dated Aug.28, 1934, wrote: "...in the dates 30 November to 6 December 1847, the Moon was in the last quadrant of its journey, on November 30 rising about midnight as a Half Moon in the sky of course until dawn. Toward the end of this period, on December 6, the Moon would be an exceedingly small crescent, rising just before dawn."
93. Spalding, *Senate Document*, p. 32, includes Osborn's account.
94. Original letter in Coll. W. Copy in Hulbert, *O.P.*, VIII: 257 ff.
95. Bancroft, *Oregon*, I: 661.
96. Lockley, *Oregon Trail Blazers*, p. 357, quoting Nancy Osborn Jacobs.
97. Brouillet, *House Document*, p. 54, quoting from a statement made by Stanley. McBean's letter of March 12, 1866 (see ante fn. 85), contains statements which do not agree with earlier accounts given by Osborn and Stanley.