

Oregon Trail — A Historical Phenomenon

by Peggy R. Baldwin

Wagon Train, a television program airing from 1957 to 1965, opened with an orderly line of wagons coming across a grassy knoll, under a spreading oak tree, clean people and large Conestoga wagons with matching, clean white covers and smiling wagon drivers who shook the reins over glossy matched sets of horses. The scouts would leave the train, frequently, and get involved in all kinds of trouble with people living in very established looking houses along the trail. Quite often this trouble would have nothing to do with helping the wagon train he was scouting for. Indians were one of their biggest problems, of course, and to protect themselves the pioneers would circle their wagons at night. One fan said, on a web site, that, “Wagon Train followed the trials and tribulations of pioneering families as they set out from the East to carve out a new life in the West soon after the American Civil War.”

It appears that the program was popular with people whose main criteria was something other than accuracy. The migratory deluge of the Oregon Trail was down to a trickle by the beginning of the Civil War, with most people traveling it between 1841 through 1860. Nearly 300,000 people traveled the trail, with over 75,000 wagons following rivers most of the way, and only moved away from water if necessary, or it offered a mile and time reducing shortcut. The route of the Oregon Trail started in Missouri, in St Joseph or Independence in the 1840s and by 1850 also from Westport (today’s Kansas City) and Kaneshville, Iowa (today’s Council Bluffs). It cut through Kansas prairies, northwest along the Little Blue to Nebraska’s Platte River and followed the Platte River, on the north side, if coming from Kaneshville, or the south side, if coming from Missouri, and the two paths joined at either Fort Laramie, Wyoming or near Caspar, Wyoming. It followed the North Platte in Nebraska, the Sweetwater River to the Rocky Mountain South Pass in Wyoming; continuing across the Green River Valley to Idaho’s Bear River Valley; up the Bear to the Snake River; along the Snake, cutting over to the Columbia River in Oregon; rafting down the Columbia River and down the Willamette River to Oregon City. Later travelers would take the Sam Barlow Road, through the mountains to Oregon City, avoiding the dangerous ride down the wild Columbia. It was the longest migratory trail in history – over 2000 miles, taking its travelers 4 1/2 to 5 months to complete, traveling 15

miles on an average day.¹

The path that would become the Oregon Trail was worn first by steps of animals, then by the steps of Native Americans, explorers, mountain men (fur traders), missionaries, and finally settlers; and would eventually become modern day highways and freeways. As one author put it, “The emigrants traveled. They settled into routines along the monotonous Platte River, jolted over the ‘black hills’ of the Laramie Mountains, soaked heat-cracked wheels in the Sweetwater River, axed a road through the Blue Mountains, rafted down the Columbia. When they reached the Willamette Valley in late October—Oregon at last!—They left a road marked for all comers.”² The trail did get easier to travel as the years went on, but there were many variations on the original, that sometimes shortened the trip and other times resulted in difficulties or even disaster. Two variations on the typical Oregon Trail route was the Sublette Cutoff, choosing a waterless trail straight across the Little Colorado Desert to the Green River, cutting off 100 miles, and the Applegate Trail, which brought people up the Willamette Valley from the south.³

Many people began their Oregon Trail travels in Independence, Missouri, which “...was no stranger to wagon trains—loads of cargo headed for Santa Fe trade, but 1843 brought a different kind of traveler – emigrants headed for Oregon.”⁴ Emigrants in the early 1840s set out in one train, hiring a guide, because the way was not well known. By the end of the decade, trains left daily from the last week in April through the month of May.⁵ The scene at Independence Landing was noisy and active, as emigrants purchased their last minute supplies and took a couple of days to find a train to join. Usually they had come to the jumping off place with a few family members and friends. They needed to join with others, getting just the right size traveling company. Sometimes companies split and joined with others, throughout the journey, for lots of reasons: the train was too large and slow, some members wanted to take a cutoff and others did not, etc.

As time went on, the way along the Oregon Trail became more developed. Forts were built to protect the emigrants – Fort Hall in Idaho, Fort Laramie in Wyoming. Trading posts popped up to provide supplies for the travelers. Ferries were established (run by Native American or Mormons mostly) at the most difficult,

dangerous river crossings, and even toll bridges in a number of places.⁶ One 1850 Oregon Trail immigrant commented, "Find a great many companies continually in sight. In fact it is one continued stream. As far as we can see, both in front and near the horizon is dotted with white wagon covers of emigrants, like a string of beads."⁷ The problems of isolation were replaced with problems of increased population, such as having to compete for forage for the stock, requiring them to drive their stock miles from the established trail to feed them. Disease was promoted by crowded conditions.

TRAVELING ADVICE

Guide books were published, mostly in the early 1840s and after, with advice; some good, some bad. Joseph E. Ware's *Emigrant's Guide to California*, which may have contained some helpful information, but gave the bad advice to rest on Sunday and said emigrants would get there 20 days earlier. That was not correct and the people and their animals would do better if they traveled almost every day, with infrequent layovers.⁸ Lanford W. Hastings' popular guide book included a route he had never seen. As Gregory Franzwa says, "George Donner bought a copy and swore by it..."⁹

Good advice came from other sources. Joel Palmer, who made the trip west in 1845 and 1846, wrote one of the best guides.¹⁰ Palmer told them, "Emigrants should endeavor to arrive at St. Joseph early in April, so as to be in readiness to take up the line of march by the middle of April. Companies however, have often started as late as the 10th of May; but in such cases they seldom arrive in Oregon until after the rainy season commences in the Cascade range of mountains."¹¹ T H Jefferson's 1849 map of the Emigrant Road could be summarized, "Travel light, travel resolutely, travel in small groups. Pioneers should use pack mules or wagons. Large parties afforded 'mutual protection from Indians' but increased risks of disease, dust, and dissension."¹² Dr. Marcus Whitman, who established a Presbyterian mission in Walla Walla in 1836, had this to say, "Travel, travel, TRAVEL, Nothing else will take you to the end of your journey; nothing is wise that does not help you along; nothing is good for you that causes a moment's delay."¹³

PREPARATIONS

Travelers would learn that the cumbersome Conestoga wagons used on the east coast, or even the large supply wagons used on the Santa Fe Trail, would not do well on the varied terrain of the Oregon Trail. Their

wagons would be much smaller wagons, called prairie schooners. They would also learn that horses were not the best animals to pull their wagons, but mules, and second best were oxen, which were a third the cost of mules. They would drive the oxen that most of them would use with a whip, not the reins used with horses, whacking the oxen as they walked alongside them. They would not be riding these wagons as they moved. For that matter, only the sick or lame would ride in their wagons, because there were no springs to cushion the jolts of the trail.¹⁴

They learned exactly what to take and how much. People who did not heed the advice of the guidebooks or listened to bad advice from others and who did not heed the advice to travel light left treasured items along the trail. It was especially difficult for the women to leave their family heirlooms; they were reminders of the family and friends they had left behind, and probably would never see again. "Along the banks of the North Platte to where the Sweetwater road turns off, the amount of valuable property thrown away is astonishing – iron, trunks, clothing, &c., lying strewn about to the value of at least fifty thousand dollars in about twenty miles."¹⁵

The pioneers would learn to vary their wagon train formation based on circumstances. In the places where we can still see deep ruts cut into the land, we know that the emigrants traveled the same ground, one after another, in a line. In other places, where the trail no longer is visible, they may have traveled in a train, one mile wide, and one wagon long, to avoid the dust of the other wagons. Where there was a great deal of dust and no way to spread out, people's eyes were red and dry.¹⁶ In places, where the terrain allowed it, the Oregon Trail might be as much as 10, or even 20, miles wide. At night they would form their wagons into a circle, not as a defense against the Indians, but to contain their cattle, to keep them from wandering off.

They would learn that they needed to travel from day break until dusk, 7 days out of 7, with an occasional day of rest. They had over 2,000 miles to travel, would need to average 15 miles per day.

ADVERSITY

The pioneers may have been the most worried about the "savage Indians," but soon discovered that there were more likely threats; disease, accidents, lame and dying oxen and stock, a lack of food and water, and Midwestern storms that would drench the emigrants and swell the water ways making for dangerous crossings.

The emigrants soon learned to prepare themselves to withstand these terrible storms and prevent the stampeding of their stock by placing their wagons in a circle, with the oxen on the inside, frequently chained to the wagon wheels by their heads. This method had the advantage not only of preventing loss of stock, but by concentrating in a small space all wagons offered more resistance to the wind and less surface to the storm. (From Velina Williams' diary)¹⁷

One source would comment, "The journey...is attended with some hardships and privation—nothing, however, but that can be overcome by those of stout heart and good constitution."¹⁸ But for some it was enough to end in abandoned dreams, and maybe even death.

WHAT WOULD LEAD TO THIS PHENOMENON?

What would cause people to travel the Oregon Trail, in spite of the dangers? It amounts to some really good advertising and the push-pull of migration. The former took decades to germinate, to work its magic on the population's psyche. The latter took just the right timing. If either of those things had been missing, who know how history would have played out?

ADVERTISING: BUILDING DEMAND

"Advertising" quite often came from local newspapers—announcements of talks given about the trail west, letters to the editors from emigrants who had made it. People who wanted to make the trip need to know: Was it worth the risk? Was the Oregon Territory as fruitful as they had heard? Could they transport everything they needed and make it safely to the Oregon Territory with their families? Would they be able to improve their economic position and lifestyle by making the expensive and time consuming trip to Oregon? As the years went by, from the purchase of the Louisiana Purchase until the 1840s and 1850s, when most people would travel the Oregon Trail, people who were hungry for information would get it and would know that the Oregon Trail was achievable by anyone of moderately good health; men, women, and children.

Timeline, showing the "pull" influences that led to massive migration on the Oregon Trail:

1803 – Louisiana Purchase, which made the land west of the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains the property of the United States. In 1805 Thomas Jefferson sent Lewis and Clark to explore the territory and report back to him what they found. The Oregon Territory was just on the other side of the Louisiana Purchase, starting in the Rocky Mountains, extending to the Pacific Ocean. Its southern border was the 42nd parallel (part of Mexico known as California) and its northern border was 54°40', at the edge of Russian Territory.¹⁹

1812 – Robert Stuart, an Astorian, traveled the Oregon Trail in reverse, following Indian trails. From an article in the Missouri Gazette (St. Louis), published on May 15, 1813: "By information received from these gentlemen, it appears that a journey across the continent of North America might be performed with a wagon..."²⁰ Wagon transportation was essential to mass emigration, in order to transport a family's personal possessions.

1821 – Thomas Hart Benton, one of Missouri's first Senators was seated in December 1821 and was a big proponent for the acquisition of the Oregon Territory.²¹

1836 – Marcus Whitman's pregnant wife Narcissa was the first woman to travel the Oregon Trail.²²

1837 – Sam Parker wrote one of the best guide books and, "That was the copy farmers wanted."²³

1838 – Lewis F. Linn introduced a territorial bill in Congress on Feb 7th.

1843 – first mass migration of settlers across the Oregon Trail – more than 1000 emigrants, 120 wagons, and several thousand head of cattle.²⁴

In the end, "The American press was in high gear. National stories appeared constantly. What really was electrifying, however, was when the guy from your own township sold out his farm, threw everything in a wagon and moved over the trail to Oregon or California. Neighbors were fascinated and envious. If he made it, why couldn't they? Then the letters to the home town paper started coming back; maybe three or four in one mail."²⁵

WAS IT INSANITY?

Referring to the first migration of 1843, Horace Greely, a young New York City reporter, clucked his

tongue and wrote, “This migration of more than a thousand persons in one body to Oregon wears an aspect of insanity.”²⁶

There is no doubt that it took courage to leave behind the life they had known and to face the adversities the Oregon Trail doled out, but the encouraging news they heard from others, and the fact that the Oregon Trail and the Oregon Territory was more and more known and more populated, made it a possibility for more people.

Any migration is a result of push forces at the place of origin and pull forces from the destination.

For a great many the place of origin was Missouri. Many of their fathers and grandfathers had emigrated from places south and east. “Missouri and Iowa farmers, comfortable and secure, their farms paid for, their ground all broken up and fertile, read these letters. The old thoughts welled up, the same thoughts that drove them to Iowa and Missouri in the first place. They had something to prove, and they proved it. The challenge was gone. Neighbors came in, working a section or two away from their farms. Maybe a fence dispute now and then. Howling north winds in January, working a half hour every morning to cut four inches of ice out of the creek for the stock.”²⁷ They were carrying on the tradition of the family that came before them, to move on when things got crowded. States such as Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri, on the edge of the west, had seen their population double or triple. One emigrant said he went “because the thing wasn’t fenced in and nobody dared to keep me off.”²⁸

There was a national panic in 1837, with the price of improved farm land down to \$5 an acre from \$25. It was followed by a depression in 1842 in which “... wheat had fallen to 15 cents a bushel and you couldn’t

give the corn away.” When adult children’s elderly parents died, they felt free to emigrate and many of them did. Those would be some of the factors that would supply the push.²⁹

The pull of the Oregon Territory was that they had heard the land of the Willamette Valley was very fertile, no blizzards, very little snow. The weather was mild, with lots of gentle rain; an ideal agrarian climate. If family and friends had moved there, why not join them? Some, especially single men, just went for the adventure. For the more practical minded, the economic incentive of gold in California in 1849 and free land in Oregon, with the Donation Land Act, was the final convincer.

Some will tell you that Manifest Destiny, the claiming of the Oregon Territory from the British for the United States, was a reason some immigrated. Not likely! Although, it may have made them feel a bit more holy about their venture.

In the end even Horace Greeley got on the bandwagon, when he finally came to say, “Go West Young Man, Go West!”

After the Civil War, Indian hostilities would increase, as they were forced onto reservations, and they began to see the end of their lifestyle. The first transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869. Mass wagon travel ended in 1878, when the cost of travel by rail was low enough in price to compete.³⁶

REWRITING *WAGON TRAIN*

A more accurate version of the *Wagon Train* television program would open with small prairie schooners crossing the dusty prairie, wagons spread out to each side to avoid each other’s dust; a crowd of people walking, including bullwhackers controlling their oxen from

Emigration to Oregon, California, 1849 – 1860³⁰

| Year | Event | Oregon | California |
|------|--|--------|------------|
| 1840 | | 13 | -- |
| 1841 | | 24 | 34 |
| 1842 | 112 emigrants left Independence on May 14—8 wagons, plus horses, mules, and cattle | 125 | -- |
| 1843 | First mass migration, 1,000 emigrants (including travelers to Utah), 120 wagons, principally the famed Jesse Applegate party ¹ | 875 | 38 |
| 1844 | Fremont’s Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and California in the Years 1843-’44—set off a tidal wave of interest ² | 1,475 | 53 |

| Year | Event | Oregon | California |
|---------------------------------|---|---------------|----------------|
| 1845 | President James Polk’s First Annual Message to Congress, pleads his case, “That it will ultimately be wise and proper to make liberal grants of land to the patriotic pioneers, who amidst privations and dangers lead the way through savage tribes inhabiting the vast wilderness intervening between our frontier settlements and Oregon, and who cultivate and are ever ready to defend the soil, I am fully satisfied. This is the best manner of securing national rights in Oregon. We have reached a period when Oregon must either be abandoned, or firmly maintained.” ³ | 2,500 | 260 |
| 1846 | Northern boundary of Oregon established at 49th parallel by treaty with Great Britain. Emigration down probably due to the impending trouble with England and Mexico ⁴ | 1,200 | 1,500 |
| 1847 | Mormon Trail est. offshoot of Oregon Trail, near Fort Bridger. Trouble with England and Mexico was over. | 4,000 | 450 |
| 1848 | Gold discovered in California. Oregon Territory established. Over 12,000 living in Oregon (1 in 4 people was from Missouri) ⁵ | 1,300 | 400 |
| Pre-gold rush subtotals | | 11,512 | 2,735 |
| 1849 | | 450 | 25,500 |
| 1850 | Donation Land Act went into effect—government land to male U.S. citizens, 320 acres to single males, and additional 320 acres if they were married. | 6,000 | 44,000 |
| 1851 | | 3,600 | 1,100 |
| 1852 | | 10,000 | 50,000 |
| 1853 | | 7,500 | 20,000 |
| 1854 | | 6,000 | 12,000 |
| 1855 | | 500 | 1,500 |
| 1856 | | 1,000 | 8,000 |
| 1857 | | 1,500 | 4,000 |
| 1858 | | 1,500 | 4,000 |
| 1859 | Oregon became 33rd state of the United States | 2,000 | 17,000 |
| 1860 | | 1,500 | 9,000 |
| 1840 – 1860 Grand Totals | | 53,062 | 200,335 |

one side with their whips. In the beginning, some of the wagons are brightly painted, with contrasting trim, and the white covers might be painted with the name of the owner or phrases like “Oregon or Bust. A few people might be riding wagons with mules attached, others might be riding a horse, and others might even ride in a carriage. People would be too busy doing the work required by their travels west and too tired to stray off and get themselves into unrelated and random trouble. Some wagon trains would rarely encounter Indians and others would find them ready to trade, or would see them offer a ferry ride over a difficult river crossing for

a charge. They would see many other groups of Oregon Trail travelers, sometimes making it feel like a modern highway.³⁷ They would have to make decisions about what route to travel, because there was not just one Oregon Trail. They might fan out or stay in a single line, depending on the terrain. Every evening they would circle their wagons to make sure their cattle and horses were there in the morning. At the end of the Trail, the wagons would be bare, the paint long ago blasted by sand and weathered off. The covers would be dingy, wordless, and tattered. The emigrants would be lucky if they still had shoes.³⁸

SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT FOR THE REST OF THEIR LIVES

People may have come in a little worse for the wear, but most of them, especially the ones who did not face the more grueling effects of the trail, would think of this as the adventure of their lives. They would have a story to tell that would never grow old, at least for the tellers. "There was a time in the 20th century, when it was a misfortune to be a grandchild of persons who went west in covered wagons. The conditioned response was to hightail it when granddad was seen wobbling your way with a nostalgic glint in his eye, ready to narrate his tale of hardship and privation on the Oregon Trail for the umpteenth time."³⁹

The Oregon Trail travelers would test themselves, sometimes to the limit, and have experiences and see things that only the Oregon Trail could offer.

The emigrant never before had experienced a western sunset, never before experienced a western thunderstorm, never before had seen a mountain, nor desert, nor any Indian in his native habitat. Few had seen waterfalls. None had seen infinite prairies. Few had traveled for more than two or three days at a time; none certainly had traveled four or five months without respite. None had faced death on a day to day basis, with such studied nonchalance or such determined fatalism. Few of those rugged individualists ever thought they would willingly subject themselves to the military discipline and sometimes despotism that had to prevail in the ranks of the wagon trains.⁴⁰

They would forever be changed by the Oregon Trail, knowing that they had made it through the boredom of the endless miles and the challenge of the more rigorous sections. They would make friends who would last through the years, because they had relied on each other for the five-month Oregon Trail test. The Oregon Trail emigrants had been tested and found a strength within that would carry them through the rest of their lives.

(Endnotes)

1 Bill and Jan Moeller, *The Oregon Trail: a Photographic Journey* (Wilsonville, Oregon: Beautiful America Publishing Co., 1985), 14 – 15.

2 "Wagon Maps for the Great Migration," *Historic Atlas of the United States: Centennial Edition*, Wilbur E. Garrett, editor (Washington, D.C. National Geographical Society, 1998), p. 194-5.

3 Moeller, *The Oregon Trail*, 14. William E. Hill, *The Oregon Trail: Yesterday and Today: a Brief History and Pictorial Journey Along the Wagon Tracks of Pioneers* (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1992), 20.

4 "Wagon Maps for the Great Migration," 194-5.

5 Gregory M. Franzwa, *The Oregon Trail Revisited* (St Louis: Patrice Press, 1972), 37.

6 William E. Hill, *The Oregon Trail*, xxviii.

7 *Ibid.*, xxiv.

8 Gregory M. Franzwa, *The Oregon Trail Revisited*, 28.

9 *Ibid.*, 23.

10 *Ibid.*, 29.

11 *Ibid.*, 34.

12 "Wagon Maps for the Great Migration," 194-5.

13 *Ibid.*, 194-5.

14 Moeller, *The Oregon Trail*, 15.

15 William E. Hill, *The Oregon Trail*, xxvii.

16 Gregory M. Franzwa, *The Oregon Trail Revisited*, 40.

17 William E. Hill, *The Oregon Trail*, 53.

18 "Wagon Maps for the Great Migration," p. 194-5.

19 Gregory M. Franzwa, *The Oregon Trail Revisited*, 1.

20 *Ibid.*, 3.

21 *Ibid.*, 7.

22 William E. Hill, *The Oregon Trail*, 13

23 Gregory M. Franzwa, *The Oregon Trail Revisited*, 17.

24 Joyce Badgley Hunsaker, *Seeing the Elephant: The Many Voices from the Oregon Trail* (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech University Press, 2003), 2.

25 Gregory M. Franzwa, *The Oregon Trail Revisited*, 21.

26 "Wagon Maps for the Great Migration," p. 194-5.

27 Gregory M. Franzwa, *The Oregon Trail Revisited*, 21-22.

28 *Ibid.*, 7.

29 Gregory M. Franzwa, *The Oregon Trail Revisited*, 6.

30 John D. Unruh, *The Plains Across: the Overland Emigrants and Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 119-20.

31 Franzwa, *The Oregon Trail Revisited*, 23.

32 Klausmeyer, *Oregon Trail Stories*, ix.

33 Joyce Badgley Hunsaker, *Seeing the Elephant*, 3.

34 Franzwa, *The Oregon Trail Revisited*, 23.

35 *Ibid.*, 24.

36 Joyce Badgley Hunsaker, *Seeing the Elephant*, 3 - 4.

37 William E. Hill, *The Oregon Trail*, xxiv.

38 Moeller, *The Oregon Trail*, 15.

39 Gregory M. Franzwa, *The Oregon Trail Revisited*, 54.

40 *Ibid.*, 45.

cally to the staff about events on the outside. Mary was able to get a letter through to her brother in the U.S. letting him know they were all safe, though she was separated from the rest of the family. Her parents and sisters had been taken in early February to the University of Santo Tomas, which had been set up as a huge internment camp. Santo Tomas was a large urban campus, easily secured, with many buildings suitable for housing the thousands of civilian prisoners of war. The university, founded in 1611, was one of the most revered landmarks in Manila.⁸

In late October the staff were given the choice of joining the American consular group at another residence in Pasay City, or going into the Santo Tomas internment camp. Some, including Bishop Binstead, ended up at the Los Baños camp outside of Manila. The thought of being with her parents and sisters, and with a larger group of people was comforting, and Mary quickly chose to join them. The joy she felt on seeing her parents and sisters again was indescribable. Come what may, at least they were together. At the beginning of the Occupation, the Santo Tomas camp was organized by a committee of internees who made rules, kept order, and assigned all internees to jobs. Mary worked as a stenographer initially, and then went on to teach in the camp elementary school.⁹ Mary, along with others in the camp, tried very hard to maintain some sort of normal routine for the hundreds of children in the camp. Adults gave up their own rations to ensure the children got enough to eat.

When Mary first entered Santo Tomas, her father escorted her through the camp showing her where everything was, stopping to greet old acquaintances from pre-war days. As they were moving around the complex, they came across a group of men chatting on the steps of one of the buildings. Her father introduced her to one of them, a businessman he had known slightly before the War. It was Henry Bennett, a Manila stockbroker. He would come to be the most important person in Mary's life.

Henry had come out to Manila in 1935 with the U.S. Army and had decided to remain in Manila after his tour of duty was over. He had fallen in love with the City, and saw more opportunities there than he could ever hope for back in his hometown in Iowa. He tried several ventures and finally had begun to see some success in his stockbrokerage business when the war broke out. He was immediately called back to active duty. His uniforms hadn't been delivered yet when the City fell, and under the impression he was a civilian, the Japa-

nese assigned him to Santo Tomas along with the rest of the civilian POW's. It didn't take long for these two to realize they had met their life's mate. Hours were spent talking about their lives, their hopes, and their future. However, the grim reality was that they weren't sure they would have a future. Strict separation of the sexes was in place in Santo Tomas. There were separate dorms for the men, and women. The harshest of punishments were promised for women in camp who got pregnant. Needless to say they certainly forbade all marriages. Henry and Mary desperately wanted to get married.

Henry turned to one of his close friends in the camp, a Dominican priest, who agreed to help the couple, even at the risk of severe punishment. A secret wedding ceremony was held in 1943. Shortly after that the Japanese finally agreed to marriages in camp. Henry and Mary went through the formal process in order to allay any suspicions of the secret marriage, and on May 31, 1944 a formal marriage ceremony was held, the first in the camp.¹⁰ This couple, whose marriage was to last until Henry's death in 1981, was finally together as husband and wife. Perhaps their joy at finding each other during the most traumatic time of their lives helped them survive during the following year. As the tides of war began to turn against the Japanese, they became increasingly hostile to the prisoners in Santo Tomas. They gradually cut all the food rations, till eventually people had to survive on approximately 1000 calories of food or less a day.¹¹ Disease became prevalent, and the death rate began to climb. Who can say what might have happened if the war had not ended when it did? For several days in January 1945 heavy bombing could be heard over Manila from American planes. Finally in early February American planes flew over Santo Tomas and something fell from one of the planes – the pilot's goggles. Written on them – “Roll out the barrel”.¹²

Mary and her new husband were free at last – ready to begin a new life. Their world for three years had been the confines of Santo Tomas. They all suffered from a host of illnesses: beriberi, severe malnutrition, fatigue, and anxiety. Henry had contracted tuberculosis as well as hepatitis. Mary had gone from a healthy 140 lbs down to 90.¹³ The average loss of weight in the camp was 51 pounds for men and 32 pounds for women.¹⁴ Catching up on three years worth of news began – some happy, much heartbreaking. Henry's father had died during the internment years; Mary's beloved grandparents in New York had both died, not knowing what had happened to their son's family. Mary's cousin Betty and her mother

were found dead outside their home in Manila, victims of the final bombing of Manila. Next to their bodies was a dead Japanese soldier with a grenade clutched in his hand. There were some happy surprises. Her brother had gotten married in the States. Mary's Uncle William appeared one day walking up to them in Santo Tomas – he had just been released from a slave labor camp in Manchuria, where he had been sent after surviving the Bataan Death March and the initial camp at Cabanatuan. At first they did not recognize him. Everyone thought he had died during the Death March along with his cousin.¹⁵

The surviving internees and their civilian population had stood the test of fire – and literally so. The great city of Manila was put to the torch in the course of its liberation by the American forces. As the Japanese retreated, they went on a killing rampage. Corpses floated in the Pasig River and lay unburied in the rubble of the streets of the city. The destruction was so complete streets could hardly be recognized. In churches and chapels and in their own courtyards the dead lay stacked like cordwood. All places of refuge became the halls and fields of death as the Japanese threw grenades and burned buildings. In a swimming pool in one area there was no longer water – it was filled with bodies. In an ironic and tragic note, as the Japanese forces withdrew from places where their own wounded lay, their General came and issued grenades to those soldiers who could not walk to ensure them a merciful death, for the buildings were going to be fired.

In February 1945 Mary Connor Bennett again found herself standing at attention in a courtyard. But this time it was to watch the American flag raised. The courtyard was filled with a ragged mass of emaciated people. All focused their eyes with tears streaming from them on the American flag. The crowd's voices lifted in a heartfelt rendition of "God Bless America".¹⁶ This time Mary and her fellow internees had a future to look forward to, hope for a new life with her family, husband and friends.¹⁷

In January of 2008, Mary Connor Bennett sat in a wheelchair in an assisted living facility in Roseville, MN listening to an afternoon musical program. Her eyes were dimmed by age, her mind robbed of its brilliance and memory by advancing Alzheimer's. The program ended with "God Bless America". The song brought back one of those rare flashes of memory and Mary struggled to rise from her wheelchair. The staff rushed over, worrying that she would fall, and assured her she could relax and sit down. But she continued to

struggle to stand. She looked at them and clearly said, "I will stand for this song till the day I die." A hush came over the group as one by one the other elderly residents joined her and rose to their feet.¹⁸

On March 6, 2008, Mary Connor Bennett took leave of her three daughters at her bedside and joined her beloved husband forever. We stand for her now.¹⁹

(Endnotes)

1 Morton, Louis, *The US Army in WWII, The War in the Pacific, The Fall of the Philippines*, Chapter XIV.

2 CNN World News, December 13, 1997 "Chinese City Remembers the Japanese 'Rape of Nanjing.'"

3 Personal Recollections of Frances Connor O'Keefe as related to her niece, Mickey Bennett Sieracki.

4 Personal Recollections of Mary Catherine Bennett as related to her daughter, Mickey Bennett Sieracki.

5 *Dialogue*, A publication of the Thomas Jefferson Information Center (TJIC), Public Affairs Section, U.S. Embassy, Manila, Volume 2, No. 2, April 2001.

6 Shiels, Margo, *Bends in the Road*, 1999. Personal Recollections of Mary Catherine Bennett as related to her daughter, Mickey Bennett Sieracki.

7 Personal Recollections of Mary Catherine Bennett as related to her daughter, Mickey Bennett Sieracki.

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