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THE AMERICAN WESTWARD TRAILS”**

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## **ABSTRACT**

For my thesis, my aim was to get beyond the old stories and glories of the Wild West in America to get a better understanding the real people behind the myths; good and bad. As part of my research, I employed a great many secondary sources some of whom were unbiased while other fell on the side of aggrandising to get a good view of how historians have viewed the events that occurred during the 19<sup>th</sup> century along the westward trails. I also made use of letters and diaries that were written during the journeys as these are the most important when it would come to unveiling the harsh reality of the journey. I aim to delve deeper into the history that occurred along the trails, history that has often been ignored in favour of stories about dusty frontier towns and gunslingers. The majority of the people who trekked into the west were not cowboys or adventurers but ordinary men, women and children and it is their story I want to tell.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

The nineteenth century in North America, over the course of three short decades, saw widespread, voluntary mass migration that has had no equal in modern history. Almost half a million American people throughout the century uprooted themselves and their families to make the two thousand mile trip which often took up to six months to complete with only covered wagons and oxen across vast wild plains, parched deserts and snow-capped mountains. The majority of these travellers were spurred on by the desire for a better life and coupled with the stories of riches coming from those who discovered treasures during the California Gold Rush, made their journeys during the 1840s and early 1850s, and followed the California Trail and the Oregon Trail.

In the years that followed and right up to the present day, the travellers that made the long and arduous journey into the vast unknown that was the western portion of the North American continent were cast in the role of heroes, fearless pioneers who managed to bring civilisation to the savagery of the Wild West. These men, women, and children became shrouded in a mixture of myth and truth and were hailed as trailblazers. History has seen these people as having taken it upon themselves to uphold the message of Manifest Destiny and spread its divine cause from the beginnings of the United States on the shores of the Atlantic, right across the span of North America to the cold waters of the Pacific. The migrants' decision to venture westwards meant they were immediately classed as the finest examples of true and upstanding Americans. From the moment the first emigrant wagon turned its attention westward in 1840 the stories of the people who conquered the west were glorified. The reality of the journey these people undertook, as well as the impact it had on the Native American population who resided in the vast territory outside the United States, has been greatly ignored in favour of aggrandising legends. American history has chosen to

elevate the stories that occurred on the westward trails to levels of epic folktale, often to the detriment of the truth. Every country needs legends about the fearless and pioneering ancestors who built the land they know today and those migrants who travelled west creating a path to Pacific, most specifically on the California and Oregon Trails, were chosen to fulfil this need. Oftentimes the need for a legend means that historical facts are omitted for the sake of a good story. In this case, the harsh reality of the journey the emigrants embarked on was a brutal trek that often took four months with only rickety covered wagons and oxen to carry their earthly belongings, and no more guidance than the rutted tracks left behind by previous travellers to help them reach their destination.

There is also the fact that these migrants choose to venture beyond the boundaries of the United States of America to the unstable and often uncontrolled lands beyond the Missouri River. They held onto an unconfirmed belief that they could achieve a better life if they were to head towards the horizon of the setting sun. These travellers ended up packing all they owned, leaving everything that was familiar and head west. A mixture of hope and sheer desperation spurred these men and women to upend their lives completely, and on nothing more than hearsay and fractured stories about the glories of what was described as being the final frontier in the lofty ideals that were American expansionism. These migrants left everything they knew to travel halfway across a continent in oxen drawn wagons using only the dirt trails that were created by the wheels of thousands of other hopeful souls before them. During the journey, they had to encounter severe food and water shortages, contagious diseases and being robbed by other desperate travellers. They also had to suffer through the extremes of heat and cold as they crossed the blistering heat of the Great Salt Lake Desert, the high snow-capped peaks of the Sierra Nevada mountain range and the dangers of trespassing through territory that they country had no established control over. This all begs the question as to why this extreme and often fatal journey was preferable to staying put

within the confines of the United States. Moreover, why has history within the United States of America chosen to ignore the stories and legacies of the hardworking people who struggled and toiled to create the land we know today in favour of focusing on stories of the quick fingered gunslingers, the corrupt sheriffs and beautiful damsels in distress.

## 2. BACKGROUND TO THE EXODUS

### A LAND OF IMMIGRANTS AND MANIFEST DESTINY

The United States of America is a nation that was built on the backs of immigrants looking for a better life and this desire to explore and conquer was passed down through the generations. The epic and often bloody story of how the United States of America was made often mingles fact and fiction with great ease. It started with humble roots and the thousands of hopeful Europeans who first set foot on the untainted shores of North America after a three month journey across the sea in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The story of exploration and expansion that would come to define an entire people and their nation continued right through into the 19<sup>th</sup> century with people, who now identified themselves as American, trekking this time overland to the other side of the vast North American continent. It was after the Peace of Paris in 1783 that the American nation would begin its mass expansion westwards where they eventually succeeded in eliminating all traces of French, Spanish, and British colonial presence over the course of seventy years. <sup>1</sup>

The US government began their first official foray into the west when then President Thomas Jefferson organised and financed the expeditions of now legendary explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. The US government's desire to explore the open plains of the mid-west began when they succeed in acquiring a vast swath of territory from the French in the 1803 Louisiana Purchase. Following that acquisition the Lewis and Clark Expedition left St. Louis, Missouri on the 14<sup>th</sup> of May 1804 and travelled up the Missouri River to map the newly acquired territory as far north as present day Montana. In contrast to how the Native Americans were treated by future travellers, Lewis and Clark respected the knowledge of the native peoples and in turn, they were offered shelter and even accompanied by a young

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Brogan, *The Penguin History of the USA* (London, 1999), p. 219



Shoshone Indian woman named Squaw Sacajawea for many months.<sup>2</sup> A woman who is now one of the most celebrated female figures in American history. Lewis and Clark's first journey would last over eighteen months and paved the way for thousands of travellers throughout the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Louisiana Purchase and the subsequent Lewis and Clark Expeditions were all influenced by a series of ideals, a social creed, called Manifest Destiny.

The term Manifest Destiny was first coined in July of 1845 by Irish-American newspaper editor John L. O'Sullivan regarding the proposed annexation of Texas. Despite the phrase not being in circulation until that time the ideals behind it had existed at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> The creed behind Manifest Destiny was to find its roots with then President Thomas Jefferson who said, "Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God." Jefferson fears what would happen when the growing population would start to be out of balance with the land and saw westward expansion as the only option that would prevent having a large, landless population who would be dependent on the state. Jefferson's vision of expansion soon evolved into something that would become necessary to maintain the prosperity of the American nation. John Adams was also an advocate of expansionism stating bluntly, "Power always follows property."<sup>4</sup> Manifest Destiny encompassed three particular notions; the moral superiority of the American people; their mission to expand the United States and their way of life, and finally the fact that it was their divine destiny as laid out by god to bring civilisation to "the wild and savage tribes" of the west.<sup>5</sup> The Manifest Destiny is what history claims that many Americans felt they were embodying by travelling west. Manifest Destiny is a collection of vague ideals and creeds that popularised the notion that

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<sup>2</sup> John A. Hawgood, *The American West* (Bungay, 1967), p. 83

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 153

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York, 1987), p.58

<sup>5</sup> Paul Van Develder, *Savages and Scoundrels: The Untold Story of America's Path to Empire through Indian Territory* (Ann Arbor, 2009), p. xviii

the American people were destined to expand their nation across the continent. It was used by the president James K. Polk in 1846 to justify an unprovoked war with Mexico in order for the United States to spread its influence and the „American dream“ to Texas and California and to wrest control of the Pacific Northwest away from the British.<sup>6</sup> Polk who had not been a favourite to win the presidential election in 1844 latched onto the vague ideas of expansionism to gain the support of the people. Polk stated that it was his “duty to assert and maintain by all constitutional means the right of the United States to that portion of our territory which lies beyond the Rocky Mountains.”<sup>7</sup> Manifest Destiny described the American people as being superior beings tasked with the glorious role of spreading the ideals of the United States across the continent. In comparison to the lofty ideas of American Exceptionalism, the Native Americas were considered to be nothing more than savages with one congressman declaring “the Indian... must be crushed... humanity may forbid it, but the interest of the white man demands their extinction.”<sup>8</sup> This racist world belief meant that quite a few emigrants who travelled through Native American territory saw the tribes as godless savages who were infringing on their right to expand the borders of the United States while they sought out their own respective paradises in the uncharted and unspoiled plains of the west. These emigrants travelled with the full backing of the government who welcomed the influx of Americans into territories that they were carefully but aggressively bringing under the control of the federal government.

What is astounding is the fact that the ideas behind Manifest Destiny have persisted to the present day, and can be seen most obviously within the creed of the Aryan Nations. Headquartered in northern Idaho, the Aryan Nations was created by people who sought to create “the ultimate establishment of a „radically pure“ white supremacist state in the Pacific

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<sup>6</sup> Van Devellder, *Savages and Scoundrel*, p. 145

<sup>7</sup> Will Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous: Blazing the Trails to Oregon and California 1812-1848* (Norman, 2010), p. 217

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 205

Northwest.” In 1986 Richard Butler, leader of the Aryan Nations stated, “The whites are self-evidently the leaders, the light bearers of the world... the culture bearers; they have been the civilising influence on the world.”<sup>9</sup> One hundred and forty years ago, his words would have been exactly the creed that Manifest Destiny prided itself on but in the present day, his words do not encourage a desire to expand the American nation and civilise the western portion of the American continent. Instead his radical beliefs are more likely to evoke disgust and horror within most Americans.

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<sup>9</sup> Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, p. 174-5

### 3. A MAMMOTH TREK INTO THE WEST

The bulk of the half a million <sup>10</sup> Americans who chose to make the journey west did so between 1840 to 1848 and most followed two particular routes that became known as the Oregon Trail and the California Trail. For most of the emigrants, the journey started on the banks of the Missouri River, which left them with a journey that spanned more than half the continent. The first part of the voyage ran along the banks of the Platte River regardless of which part of the west coast the emigrants wished to go. Emigrants then followed the North Platte River towards Fort Laramie, which was in the eastern portion of present day Wyoming. When the emigrants reached a place called South Pass in western Wyoming, those who wished to go to Salt Lake City branched off from the main route to follow what became known as the Mormon Trail as it was famously traversed by Brigham Young and his followers in 1846, <sup>11</sup> and journeyed in a south-westerly direction.

Those going to California or Oregon continue in a north-westerly direction into present day Idaho. It was at Fort Hall that those travelling to Oregon and California finally split up as those seeking Oregon City and Fort Vancouver continued north. Those heading to California and its main cities of San Francisco and Sacramento, faced towards the sheer peaks of the Sierra Nevada mountain range, which as part of the Continental Divide, and stood as the immense barrier between the dry inhospitable Nevada desert and the fertile Sacramento Valley, which awaited them on the other side. Once the emigrants crossed over the Nevada border into California, the fertile lands of the west coast territory awaited for them, unspoiled and rich with promise as a reward for the long and gruelling journey. The emigrants were often at the mercy of the elements and were rendered helpless when the snows set in. The journey had to be timed impeccably. Most company's set off from the Missouri River in

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<sup>10</sup> Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous*, p. xviii

<sup>11</sup> Hawgood, *The American West*, p. 155

April so they could avoid the spring flooding which would spell doom for them during river crossings. However as the journey could take up to six months that meant that the emigrants were in danger of getting trapped in the snowy peaks of the Sierra Nevada and Rocky Mountain Ranges. A delay in the trip could easily prove to be fatal as the temperate began to drop dramatically and the snow began to swirl.

However, the mission to populate the California and Oregon Territories was a slow one. The population of the Oregon country in the summer of 1850 was revealed to be a modest 13,294 while California, now the most populous state in the US, had a population of less than 8,000, not including Indians.<sup>12</sup> Between 1840 and 1848, 11,512 people made the journey to Oregon, 2,735 went to California, while 4,600 emigrants went as far as Utah making the total number of emigrants during those years 18,847. These numbers do not include the 40,000 Latter-Day Saints who travelled part of the way on the same trail stopping at Salt Lake City rather than continuing on where the trail eventually split into two at Fort Hall in present day Idaho. These numbers were pre-gold rush which had a hand in the huge influx of people who would eventually make their way west. From Joel Walker and his small company of thirteen people who made the first ever overland wagon journey in 1840, to Abraham Lincoln's election as president of the United States of America approximately a quarter of a million people had walked the trails to the coastal territories of California and Oregon.

After 1848, the numbers travelling westwards rose so exponentially that overgrazing and even having a vacant place to set up camp became a real problem. From 1849 to 1860, 53,062 people made the journey to Oregon. The numbers to California jumped hugely to 200,335 during that same period while 42,862 travelled as far as Utah making the grand total of emigrants during that period a staggering 296,259. In some places, the tracks made by the

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<sup>12</sup> Kenneth L. Holmes (ed.), *Covered Wagon Women: Diaries & Letter from the Western Trails, 1840-1949* (Glendale, 1983), p. 24

thousands of emigrants and their wagons are still visible on the landscape; a living reminder of what it took to create a nation that would eventually comprise of fifty states.<sup>13</sup>



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<sup>13</sup> John D. Unruh, *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60* (Chicago, 1979), p. 119-20

<sup>14</sup> Orchard School, "Westward Expansion," 2013, <<http://sbsd.orchard.schoolfusion.us/modules/cms/pages.phtml?sessionid=&pageid=259603>> [Accessed 28 May 2013]

Along the route, the men and women involved had differing views of the journey they were undertaking. The men took to the trail with a certain zest for a new and exciting way of life while the women were more concerned with keeping the family together and healthy during the extreme transition. Married women were obligated to show support for their husbands and follow them to the West. A move into the western half of the North American continent has been viewed by many historians as something that liberated the women involved and the limits of their authority expanded in small but significant ways as the west began to form itself around these new emigrants.<sup>15</sup> According to Emerson Hough,

The chief figure of the American west, the figure of the ages, is not the long-haired, fringed-legging man riding a raw-boned pony, but the gaunt and sad-faced woman sitting on the front seat of the wagon, following her lord where he might lead her, her face hidden in the same ragged sunbonnet which had crossed the Appalachians and Missouri long before... There was the great romance of America – the woman in the sunbonnet; not, after all, the hero with the rifle across his saddle horn.<sup>16</sup>

Men and women crossed the plains in their thousands but the stories are not always divided up equally. The emigrant man has been painted as viewing the journey as a mix between a great adventure and a chancy gamble. The women's roles were often overlooked, as has been the trend since the beginning of recorded history until relatively recently. It is only during the twentieth century that women started to make their voices heard and from the sixties onwards the desire to uncover the lost stories of women in history began in earnest. Though these roles were often confined to that of wife and homemaker, historical women from Cleopatra to Catherine the Great have left undeniable legacies that have enthused countless generations to uncover more and more lost history. The characters and personalities of the men and women that took the wagon trails west were revealed through the letters, which could be sent back home from Fort Laramie, Fort Boise or from their final destination in the west. The dairies that were kept during the journey along served as excellent sources in the on-going battle to

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<sup>15</sup> Holmes, *Covered Wagon Women*, p. 3-4

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 11

decipher the reality of what occurred to emigrants on the trails. They are ordinary people that found themselves in extraordinary circumstances. Though the men looked upon the trails with a zest for adventure, the road did not offer as much excitement as it did misery and death. One government report estimated that “each mile of the two-thousand mile journey cost seventeen lives – a total of thirty-four thousand lives.”<sup>17</sup> Though numbers like these are of course good guesses the sheer number, even if it is slightly off, is still staggering. The vast majority of these bodies were buried along the trails making them the longest graveyard in the world, spanning half a continent.

Most of the diaries that were recovered were filled with everyday worries of the sort most modern people would never have to consider to the extremes that these people did. These emigrants had to worry about feed and forage for the cattle and horses, fuel for fires, and most importantly water. They also wrote about their difficulties in taking care of their children through the long journey, how and where to wash clothes, wagons breaking down, straying animals and the difficulty they had in attempting river crossings as it led to many a drowning. There was also a great variety in what these people chose to record in their journals from one girl who kept detailed records of every animal she saw along the trail to many writers who were fascinated by the variety of unspoiled and unique plant life that they encountered. Many people kept a list of the graves they spotted along the trails or illnesses suffered by family and company members. Most often, the emigrants kept records of their meetings with the Indian tribes of which vary from expressing fear and prejudice in some cases to admiration and concern in others.<sup>18</sup> The contemporary records that the emigrants held means that current historians have been able to not only examine the experiences people had on the trails but also the little things like those peoples hobbies, curiosities, the mood among the people during a time of great social and political upheaval. The vast majority of

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<sup>17</sup> Holmes, *Covered Wagon Women*, P. 15

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 18-9



families travelled between 1840 and 1848 while the Gold Rush Era numbers of 1849 were mainly comprised of men who decided to try their hand at searching for gold in the streams and ponds of California.<sup>19</sup> After 1853, the numbers heading to Oregon and California dwindled<sup>20</sup> as other states like Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada and Arizona became the destinations of choice and the railroads began to replace the old wagon routes with earnest.<sup>21</sup>

The emigrants encountered many a bizarre circumstance on the trails with one Betsy Bayley describing how one Indian man approached them while they were camped at Fort Hall, attempting to trade horses in return for a wife, and even followed the Bayley wagons for several days even after they declined his offer. The Bayley family were convinced by Stephen Meeks, who claimed to be familiar with the area, to take a different route, which became known as Meek's Cut-Off. The cut-off and Meek himself were to become notorious among emigrants travelling to Oregon when it emerged that Meeks was not as acquainted with the area as he claimed and the company were forced to travel through great stretches of arid desert with absolutely no water.<sup>22</sup> The desire to blaze new trails and create cut-offs were often the downfall of many emigrants when they branched off the customary routes as many of the horror stories from the trails occurred because the emigrants chose to test unconfirmed routes. Prime examples would be the Hastings Cut-off or the Meek Cut-off, both of which spelled doom for those travelling them. Another family that chose to take a less conventional route were the Brown Company who took the Applegate Trail instead of taking the established Oregon Trail at Fort Hall, which went through southern Idaho and into northern Oregon. The Applegate Trail instead branched off the California trail in the north western section of Nevada, crossing briefly into the northernmost section of California before going directly north to Oregon City in the western portion of the state. Letters written by Tabitha

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<sup>19</sup> Holmes, p. 25

<sup>20</sup> Unruh, *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants*, p. 120

<sup>21</sup> Holmes, p. 25

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 33, 35

Brown describe the terrible journey. Tabitha records in detail a gruesome sight, which they happened upon while travelling through a canyon in southern Oregon:

The canyon was strewn with dead cattle... Some people were in Canyon two and three weeks before they could get through; some died without any warning from fatigue and starvation; others ate the flesh of cattle that were lying dead by the wayside.<sup>23</sup>

When Tabitha Brown entered the house of a Methodist minister on Christmas day of 1846 it was to be the first time she set foot in a house for over nine months.<sup>24</sup> Occurrences like the one Tabitha recorded were all too common on the westward trails as families struggled with their oxen pulled wagons to climb mountains, cross great rivers and maintain a food supply in a harsh environment before they reached their personal promise lands thousands of miles from where they started.

Most of the stories of the women who headed west were of wives or daughters who were following the lead of the man who was head of their household. There were some unique stories however like that of Clara Brown, a former slave who had purchased her freedom and who in 1859 persuaded a group of gold prospectors to hire her as a cook and at the age of fifty-nine headed for Denver, Colorado. There she set up her own laundry and became successful enough that following the Civil War she searched for the family she hadn't seen in nearly sixty years. She ended up finding thirty-four relatives, which by steamboat and wagon and out of her own money, she brought to join her in Denver. In her later years, Clara Brown would also sponsor other wagon trains, helping black people to come to the west as she had done.<sup>25</sup>

The established trails went through several great changes in their lifetimes, transforming rapidly and radically as modern life ploughed forward like a train with no brakes. In their first

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<sup>23</sup> Holmes, p. 53

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 58

<sup>25</sup> Lillian Schlissel (ed.), *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, (New York, 2004), p. 138

incarnation, the trails were worn by the great game animals i.e. buffalo, elk, and deer; the Indian tribes; non-Indian explorers; fur trappers; settlers with wagons; railroads and finally the great highways. These trails evolved throughout the centuries having first been born by the natural instinct of animals and then capitalised upon by man. An early railroad timetable even described the route stating, “No engineer examined the course... selected originally by the instinct that guides wild animals in their choice of easy grades, it developed naturally from a trapper’s pathway into an emigrant road, and later into a trade route.”<sup>26</sup> The trails criss-crossed the western states haphazardly and lead to many large American cities like Denver, Salt Lake City, San Francisco and Los Angeles, among others. The only state west of the Missouri river that has no historical trail running through it is the most northern-westerly state of Washington.

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<sup>26</sup> Holmes, p. 20

## 4. HISTORY REMEMBERS ITS HORRORS AND ITS HEROES

History has often suffered from the issue of glorification. Reality and mythology often become deeply intertwined that it becomes difficult to differentiate between the two. Historical characters of the Wild West like Brigham Young, Buffalo Bill Cody or Billy the Kid have been shrouded in epic tales of good and evil carried out beneath a blistering sun and against a background of lawlessness that has long since come to epitomise everything about conquering the western half of the United States.

### MODERN DAY MOSES – BRIGHAM YOUNG

Brigham Young has always been a man who is both revered and hated by different factions of the population. Like the Puritans who set sail for the new world seeking religious freedom in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, so too did Brigham Young search for a place in which the Church of the Latter Day Saints could freely express their spiritual ideology. A man with charisma so influential that, eventually, 40,000 Latter Day Saints made the journey outside the United States across the Great Plains to eventually settle and build what is now the bustling Salt Lake City.<sup>27</sup> Young and his followers made the journey to the Salt Lake Valley in order to seek out a life outside the boundaries and laws of the United States. This was a different outlook to the emigrants who went to Oregon and California with the hope that the American nation would soon follow them right to the ocean shores. Within two years “that damn flag” as one Mormon elder called it had caught up with them was flying over their hard fought

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<sup>27</sup> John D. Unruh, *The Plains Across: Emigrants, Wagon Trains and the American West* (London, 1992), p. 84

„Zion“.<sup>28</sup> Those Mormons who followed Young out into the desert like a modern day Moses did so out of a desire to live out all the elements of their religion of which bigamy in particular was considered immoral in the United States. Mormons also had little belief in the democratic system, a cynicism that did not go over well with most American people who were very aware of how hard the previous generation had fought to achieve independence from the British Empire not a century earlier. It was not long before those who were members of the Church of the Latter Day Saints had completely alienated themselves from their neighbours. Having only each other and an unshakable belief in their religion those Mormons who trekked out into the unknown had full confidence in the abilities of their leader and saviour, Brigham Young, when every other American around them were rapidly and aggressively turning against them. It was on the 4<sup>th</sup> of February 1846 that Young led the first group of 16,000 Mormons over the Mississippi River, out of the United States and into the desert with the precision and authority of a military exercise.<sup>29</sup> Once the Mormons found a place to build a new home for themselves they settled down like rebels protecting themselves from the laws of the United States and the „savagery“ of the Indian tribes that manned the territory around them.

Though considered something of a messiah to the people who followed him out of the United States, Brigham Young led a life filled with extreme bloodshed. He controlled his people with a military zeal and set about the task of creating a settlement that would be in an unassailable position when the federal government came knocking. Young fended off any curiosity by the surrounding tribes decisively and harshly. One such event involving a militia formed entirely of Mormons was the Mountain Meadows massacre. In 1857 the militia, which was headed by one of Young’s closest henchmen, attacked and slaughtered 120 migrants who were passing through southern Utah on their way to California. Those

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<sup>28</sup> Hawgood, *The American West*, p. 161

<sup>29</sup> Brogan, *The Penguin History of the USA*, p. 237

murdered were described as being gentiles, which to the people of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints meant they were not a member of their church. Brigham Young saw anyone who wasn't white as being lesser having being recorded saying "that slavery was exactly what the Negro deserved."<sup>30</sup> The Mormons involved had dressed themselves up as Native Americans in an attempt to convince them to join their militia. Though there was an investigation, it was interrupted by the Civil War and in the end only one man; John D. Lee was tried and executed.<sup>31</sup> The Mountain Meadows massacre was an isolated incident when it came to tribes attacking migrants without provocation. However, Mormons were fuelled by religious teachings that often warned them about outsiders and were responsible for many massacres of both emigrants and local tribes.

Despite the mixed opinions on his character from those who followed him into the desert to those who considered him a menace there is no doubt that Brigham Young still achieved great things. He single-handedly organised the largest mass exodus in the history of the United States and he did what most thought was unachievable; he managed to create a thriving city by the Great Salt Lake, a place that had previously been deemed uninhabitable. Whatever his flaws there is no doubt that Brigham Young deserved his place in history for his significant role in shaping the country into what it is today.

## **COWARDS, HEROES, AND MURPHY'S LAW – THE DONNER PARTY**

What befell the Donner Party was to be the single, most devastating set of circumstances that was to occur on the American westward trails. On Thursday, the 15<sup>th</sup> of April 1846, the Donner and the Reed families set out from Springfield, Illinois. They reached Independence

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 243

<sup>31</sup> Unruh, *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants*, p. 184

Missouri on the 11<sup>th</sup> of May to join another wagon company who were heading to Oregon.<sup>32</sup> The Donner party that history remembers was made up of eighty-seven men women and children who attempted to make the overland journey to California by using a new route that was supposed to be quicker and safer called the Hastings Cut-Off. This new route would take the party south of the Great Salt Lake. Under the advisement of Lansford Hastings who was a well-respected explorer, the party made the decision to venture along the new route. Hastings, who had written a book about his adventures, appeared to have great luck, which always bode well with the emigrants who knew how much of a gamble they were making in journeying westwards.

The group made the fateful decision to branch off from the main trail on the 20<sup>th</sup> of July 1846. They would end up facing a trek that would not end for some of them until April of the following year. The small company was comprised of twenty wagons and made up mainly of the Reed, Eddy, Murphy, Breen, Graves<sup>33</sup> and the Donner families, headed by two brothers, George and Jacob.<sup>33</sup> The cut-off would require them to traverse Utah's Wasatch Mountains and the Great Salt Lake Desert. The trail had also never been taken with wagons so a considerable amount of time was lost clearing the way for the wagons and oxen.

It was to be a series of unfortunate circumstances that would led to disaster in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The events that occurred on that journey would become infamous among the overland emigrants as the horror story that could have befallen anyone of them. What happened to the Donner party led to a drop off in overland emigrants over the next few years with the California Gold Rush revitalising the numbers if only for a short burst. As the party had decided to take the Hastings Cut-Off, which ran south of the Great Salt Lake, this decision resulted in them having to cross the Great Salt Lake Desert. They were forced to

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<sup>32</sup> Eliza P. Donner Houghton, *The Expedition of the Donner Party and its Tragic Fate* (Chicago, 1911), pp. 6, 8

<sup>33</sup> George R. Stewart, *Ordeal by Hunger: The Story of the Donner Party* (New York, 1963), pp. 7-9

cross eighty miles of parched land with any water sources being too salty to drink. As the route was mostly untested, the journey was rough on the oxen and cattle. The Hastings Cut-Off turned out to be more trouble than it was worth as they were required first to climb over series after series of steep rises, which ended with barren volcanic hills that offered no hope of water. At the top of those hills lay “a perfectly flat plain unbroken even by sage, and dazzling white, like frost, with a glitter of salt.”<sup>34</sup> The Donner Party’s worst nightmare had come true as they faced miles, upon miles of arid, flat land, which offered no hope of an easy crossing, in fact that crossing spelled doom for the group, as it was then that their animals, having suffered during the steep climb, began to die off. The scorching temperatures during the day gave way to freezing weather at night. By the end of the second day, dehydration meant that members of the party had already begun to experience hallucinations. Above, the September sun bore down upon them, striking the white salty surface to reflect back upon them. By the dawn of the fourth day, the party rose to find that the desert still stretched out for miles in front of them. Eventually the men decided to take horses and venture out into the desert in search of water as their cattle and oxen began to lie down. Eventually the party found their way to a spring and gathered enough water to venture back and collect their wagons but the desert had taken its toll on the animals with Mr Reed in particular having nothing more than one ox and one cow to transport his three wagons the hundreds of miles to California.<sup>35</sup>

What Hastings had promised to be only forty miles that could be easily crossed in two days turned into a trek that was in reality closer to eighty miles and spelled all but doom for the remainder of the journey. In addition, it turned out that the journey through the great salt desert turned out to be only the first obstacle in their disastrous attempt to reach the Pacific Ocean. The disaster, which was the crossing of the Great Salt Lake Desert, meant that the

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<sup>34</sup> Stewart, *Ordeal by Hunger*, p 42-4

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p. 50



remaining animals were close to death and could not be pushed as hard as was necessary to make the crossing in time. After the desert both people and animals were greatly debilitated which delayed their arrival at the Sierra Nevada Mountains and left them stranded in heavy snow falls. By October, the party had reached the Humboldt River and followed its flow, which took them into a valley. At this stage, what had started as twenty wagons was now down to seventeen, the other three had to be abandoned during the desert crossing. During the journey along the Humboldt River, the group suffered even more bad luck when they came across two Indians who appeared friendly only to steal two oxen and a horse from the Graves family during the night. The tribe men also shot arrows into several oxen during the night, severally wounding many of them.

By the time the group made it to the Humboldt River, they had been together for five months and cabin fever began to set in as the party often collapsed into petty arguments. One such argument resulted in a violent fight between Mr Reed and Mr Snyder and resulted in the death of Snyder. Reed was wrought with guilt and attempted to save Snyder who on his deathbed said, "I am to blame." Despite these facts, the event only served to create further tensions within the group as Snyder who was young and cheerful had been popular while the haughty Reed was mostly disliked. The party had disintegrated from being one company who supported each other to separate family merely travelling at the same time. Tensions were not helped as the group were continuously met with bad luck, from coming across the grave of a man in Hastings company who had been shot with an arrow by Indians, to even more of their herd of cattle and oxen being raided by the surrounding tribes. By the middle of October, the desert and the raiding tribes had resulted in the loss of over one hundred cattle.<sup>36</sup> As the company progressed towards disaster, any sort of camaraderie that had built up between them was eroding away with every weary step they took towards the west. Paradise was taking a

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<sup>36</sup> Stewart, *Ordeal by Hunger*, pp. 61-4, 66, 69-70

long time to reach and for some of the group the Pacific Ocean would be something they would never get a chance to witness.

The worst disaster in terms of loss of human life was about to reach its zenith in the high mountain peaks of the Sierra Nevada range. The events in those weeks would leave behind a shady legacy of the acts of brutality a human can commit in the animal desire to survive. In contrast to the brutal self-interest of some of the travellers, there also emerged unexpected heroes and acts of complete selflessness. It was in October and November that their greatest hardship was to find them atop of that mountain range when the depths of winter had blocked their pass stranding them in a frozen wasteland. It was in those weeks of sheer desperation that the true character of the travellers finally emerged, the heroes and the cowards showing their true colours. As they progressed beyond the sparse desert towards Truckee Lake on the Nevada-California border, the families found themselves becoming thrifty with even their supplies of water, with Breen denying water for Eddy's young children. By the time they had reached the Truckee River, Eddy had not eaten in forty-eight hours. When he appealed to the Graves' and the Breen's for food, he was refused. However, Eddy was to show the first example of true humanity within the group when upon borrowing a gun he managed to bring in nine wild geese, which he shared with the group despite their selfish refusals of food earlier. Bad luck struck again when the German Mr Wolfinger was murdered by Indians and Pike was killed by his gun exploding. By now, the death toll was at five people out of the original eighty-seven. By the time the company made it to Truckee Lake (later to be renamed Donner Lake) they had split into two groups with the thrifty Breen's being in the best condition while the wagon-less Eddy's were the most destitute. The group had planned to reach the Sacramento Valley by September but only reached the lake by the end of October with the snow at three feet deep by that stage. By the 4<sup>th</sup> of November, the company found that they could progress no further and found themselves trapped in the valley with the lake

and ten foot snow drifts.<sup>37</sup> One group consisted of sixty-five men, women, and children, including the Breen family; had set up camp at what was then called Truckee Lake, where cabins had been built by previous frontiersmen. The remaining twenty-one people who did not get as far as the lake were forced to set up camp by Prosser Creek, some five miles back along the trail.<sup>38</sup> Baylis Williams was the first person to succumb to the cold and starvation in the mountains, the first death since Pike's accidental one two months previously. Jacob Donner was the first to die out of the group that had set up by Prosser Creek; he had been in bad health since he left Illinois<sup>39</sup> and was sixty five at the time of his death, the oldest member of the company.<sup>40</sup> Bit by bit, the twin horrors of the extreme cold and lack of food set in, the animals soon began to die, only to be eaten by the travellers, their hide used to create roofs for makeshift huts. When all the animals had died out and been consequently eaten, the travellers had to resort to boiling the tough hides, as it was all they had left to eat. When all sources of food had finally ran out the company, split in two groups and on the cusp of starvation, eventually turned to cannibalising the dead.

There were many heart wrenching stories from the families who made the journey to the west and the Indians who had to suffer the loss of their lands and ways of life. The Donner Party has however endured within the memories of Americans for one particular, taboo reason: the reported incidents of the survivors resorting to cannibalising those who died of exposure or starvation. There were even reports that certain people, crazed and delirious as they were with hunger and cold did not wait for members of the party to die naturally but instead, helped them along the way. These rumours of cannibalism have been hotly denied by some surviving members of the company while confirmed by others like Eliza Donner, George Donner's daughter, who had been four at the time of the journey. "Not one touched flesh of

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<sup>37</sup> Stewart, *Ordeal by Hunger*, pp.74, 76, 81, 83, 85

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid* p. 106-7

<sup>39</sup> Houghton, *The Expedition of the Donner Party*, p. 69

<sup>40</sup> Stewart, *Ordeal by Hunger*, p. 363-4

kindred body... Death would have been preferable to that awful meal.”<sup>41</sup> A letter written by Virginia Reed and the diary of Patrick Breen also authenticate the rumours of cannibalism within the party though it has never been proven that anybody had been deliberately killed in order to be eaten.<sup>42</sup> The circumstances surrounding the tragic Donner Party were often whispered among emigrants for years, as they became the gruesome example of how very wrong the journey could go. It was a series of misfortunate events from a delayed start in Missouri, being weighted down by unnecessary household items, being convinced to take a previously untested cut-off route, having to cross the barren Great Salt Lake Desert and getting repeatedly attacked by local tribes. It took three relief parties to bring the remaining survivors out of the mountain pass on the 21<sup>st</sup> of April; more than four months after the company first discovered that they were trapped in the pass.<sup>43</sup> In the end, eighty-seven people set out from Independence, Missouri and they were joined by two Indian vaqueros (cattle-drivers) in the Sierras. Out of those eighty-nine people, forty-two died during the trip while forty-seven made it out of the snows and into the California Territory. Five of those had died before they made it to the mountains, thirty-four died both in the mountain camps and while attempting to cross the mountain, and one more died just after reaching the Sacramento Valley.<sup>44</sup>

In a company full of cowards and heroes, three people distinguished themselves on both sides, Lewis Keseberg, Patrick Breen, and William Eddy. On one side, you had Keseberg and the Breen family; people who left others to die and refused to give water to other people’s children while hoarding their own food. During the trek across the Great Salt Lake Desert, an old man named Hardkoop was forced off fellow traveller Keseberg’s wagon, and went to Eddy for help. Eddy agreed to take him aboard his own wagon once they got beyond the

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<sup>41</sup> Houghton, *The Expedition of the Donner Party*, p. 82

<sup>42</sup> Hawgood, *The American West*, p 152

<sup>43</sup> Stewart, *Ordeal by Hunger*, p. 265

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p. 271

sandy spot they had been currently slogging through. Hardkoop agreed to venture ahead by himself to get beyond the soft area. In the trouble of the day, Eddy forgot about Hardkoop and by nightfall, he was missing, stricken with a guilty conscience Eddy built a large fire and kept it burning all night in the hope that Hardkoop might spot it. Keseberg flatly refused an attempt to find the old man with Breen refusing to allow Eddy to borrow one of his horses to search himself. Keseberg admitted to eating George Donner's wife, Tamsen, with the relief party retelling that he told them: "He ate her body and found the flesh the best he ever tasted!" Stating with further gruesome detail, "He obtained four pounds of fat from her body." To further what distaste the relief party had for the man they had crossed mountains to save they found that the story of her death did not ring true to them as she had been in relatively good health before the night she stumbled into Keseberg's cabin following her husband's death. In comparison to Keseberg and Breen, Eddy proved himself a man of extraordinary kindness and forgiveness. He intervened after Snyder's death when Keseberg and the Graves family were baying for Reed's blood. In the mountains, he was the one who made the effort to hunt for food when everyone else was too weak and still shared the trapping with the people who had previously refused him and his family food. When Eddy was faced with the news that Keseberg had eaten the body of his son, James, he was struck down with the belief that the man should not be allowed live. However, he found himself unable to kill the miserable, emaciated man but vowed to find him later in California should they both live. He eventually gave up on the desire to kill Keseberg later even when presented with the opportunity. There is no doubt that even through the grief of losing his entire family, the icy cold and extreme starvation, William Eddy distinguished himself as a man of unlimited honour and the greatest humanity.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Stewart, *Ordeal by Hunger*, pp. 68, 262, 65, 76, 248, 288

## 5. AN ASSAULT ON THE NATIVES

The American people, under the guidance of Manifest Destiny, felt it was their divine duty to spread their culture and beliefs across the span of the continent. In the beginning, as was the case with Lewis and Clark, the Native Americans were seen as possible trading partners and valuable allies. This was a hope that was common to both parties. Peter Burnett, a traveller who followed a route along the South Platte River commented that he “saw several Indians, who kept at a distance, and never manifested any disposition to molest us in any way. They saw we were mere travellers through their country...” The native tribes had enough experience to realise that the travellers made better trading partners than enemies.<sup>46</sup> However, over the years, the tide of passive acceptance turned violent as lines and lines of Americans tramped muddy tracks through the tribe lands killing their animals and sometimes their people and disrupting their way of life. It was not long before the native people retaliated on this assault on their livelihood while the migrants responded with firepower that decimated the native population to the point where even up to the present day they have not recovered. The migrants encountered various tribes along the trail routes who differed greatly from one another from the Sioux tribes on the Upper Missouri to the Brulé Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho tribes who were located along the Arkansas and North Platte Rivers.<sup>47</sup>

Joel Walker was to be the man who would carry the first American family across the plains to settle in the Oregon Territory in 1840. It was he who began what would become the mass exodus of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was also the first emigrant to encounter not an uninhabited wilderness but a vast spread of native people who were called „Snake Indians“ or Shoshone. The family would end up travelling alongside the Shoshone for two weeks.<sup>48</sup> An emigrant to

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<sup>46</sup> Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous*, p. 33

<sup>47</sup> Van Develder, *Savages and Scoundrels*, p. 206

<sup>48</sup> Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous*, p. 33

Oregon, David Shelton, described all the land beyond the Missouri River all the way to the Pacific Ocean as being „Indian Country“. Though many countries had laid claim to land beyond the Missouri River the reality of the situation was that this claim existed only on paper. West of the Continental Divide, Mexico maintained claim to a vast swath of territory south of the 42<sup>nd</sup> parallel but in reality, it only controlled a narrow strip of the Californian coast and old settlements in New Mexico. North of the 42<sup>nd</sup> parallel, both Britain and the United States had claimed the territory of the Pacific Northwest right up to Russian Alaska. Despite these countries“ claim to the territory, a corporation, the Hudson Bay Company, and the Indian Nations were those who truly controlled the land.<sup>49</sup> Congress acknowledged the right of the native peoples when they created „Indian Country“ west of the Missouri River in 1834. After this the Indian nations did not voluntarily cede a square foot of land to the federal government. Washakie, head of the Shoshone tribe, even reminded the governor of the Wyoming territory of the fact that “Every foot of what you proudly call America, not very long ago belonged to the red man.”<sup>50</sup> Despite this the American government held firm on the ideals of Manifest Destiny and continued to encroach on native territory with the belief that it was their god given right to do so. The white man not only brought his cultures and beliefs to the west he also brought his diseases of which the Native Americans had no immunity against. Diseases such as smallpox and measles devastated many tribes. The man known as „The Father of Oregon“ John McLoughlin reported that an estimated 90% of the Native American population in west Oregon had been wiped out even before overland migration began in earnest.<sup>51</sup> When the native tribes decided to retaliate they were greeted with guns and steel, which they had no hope of matching. Despite their disadvantage, the tribes could make life very difficult for the migrants if they wished. Oftentimes the tribes would choose to utilise the travellers as trading partners thereby making them allies. However, the racist

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 17

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p. 18

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 19

ideology of Manifest Destiny meant that many an American saw the natives as being something less than human. These travellers saw the tribes as a threat and feared their way of life simply because they could not understand it. The tribes had languages that differed completely from anything derived from the Latin alphabet, and a way of life that relied upon the land and farming rather than the industry of cities. With their darker skin and tribal nature, some aggressive travellers saw the natives as being obstacles in their journey to reach the Pacific.

In 1904, a traveller named Charles Moore who had made the overland journey in 1852 suggested that 1,800 men, women, and children had been killed by Indians during the emigration period. However, a later study has suggested that Moore's estimation is four times too large and in fact from 1840 up to 1860 there were more Indian's killed by emigrants almost every year. The final tally of deaths caused by one another was 362 emigrants and 426 Indians. Indeed, bar the year 1847, the Indians appeared to let the travellers pass unharmed with deaths from 1840 to 1849 being the result of isolated skirmishes. The tide turned in 1849 when 33 emigrants and 60 Indians were killed along the overland trails. After 1849, the death tolls on both sides rose dramatically, however it must be noted that both sides suffered casualties representing the fact that the blame should be placed on both sides.<sup>52</sup> In the years where no emigrants were killed there were also no Indians killed.

Despite the death toll, the figures still certainly dispute the „savagery“ of the tribes as they have been commonly labelled in history, and especially popular culture. For years after the overland emigration, Native Americans were always placed in the role of villains, savages who killed and scalped their victims unceremoniously. It was the American traveller who was the hero of the story and had no choice but to defeat the savages if they were ever to find paradise. Contrary to this dearly held belief of the Native American being animals was the

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<sup>52</sup> Unruh, *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants*, pp. 184-5



fact that on many occasions it was the „innocent“ American traveller who was crueller than the „savages“ they abhorred. One such man was Texan Jim Kinney who was travelling beyond Fort Hall, present day Idaho, in 1845 when he spotted an Indian near the trail. He then announced his plans to make the man his personal slave and threatened to kill any of his fellow travellers if they interfered. Kinney then proceeded to attack the man and handcuff him before putting a rope around his neck and tying the uncomprehending man to the back of his wagon. For the next week, Kinney rode behind the wagon on horseback whipping the man until his spirit was completely broken. Kinney informed a member of his travelling company that if the man were to run away he would simply have his dog track him down and then kill him “to show the other Indians the superiority of the white man” as Kinney boasted “he had killed plenty of Negroes and an Indian was no better than a Negro.” Eventually however the man managed to escape taking with him some of Kinney’s possessions for which the other travellers secretly rejoiced especially when Kinney was unable to track the man down. There have been many reported occasions where the emigrants have shown absolutely no regard for the native tribes with Guide Caleb Greenwood’s son killing an innocent Indian who had done nothing more than startle his horse. Greenwood having nearly been thrown off his horse was indignant when members of his company laughed at him at which he suddenly shot the man, later to boast about it.

In 1849, there was another unprovoked attack by emigrants this time on Snake squaw Indians.<sup>53</sup> Another such unprovoked attack was the Sand Creek Massacre this time in June 1864. Members of the Colorado Territory militia led by religious minister, J.M. Chivington, attacked and slaughtered a group of Cheyenne’s who were camped peacefully under a flag of truce. In the end over seventy men and two hundred innocent women and children were slaughtered by Chivington and his bloodthirsty followers. When later questioned Chivington

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<sup>53</sup> Unruh, *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants*, pp. 186-7

even admitted he was responsible for his men's „excesses“. The result of the massacre, also called the Chivington Massacre, soured Indian-White relations for years. The militia who „tried“ and executed „guilty“ natives often had them hanged, which was the greatest humiliation an Indian could suffer. On the occasions when natives led an attack on white emigrants and settlers, it was usually in retaliation to an earlier grievance. However, Americans in positions of power continued to hold beliefs that were racist and inflammatory. One such man was General William Tecumseh Sherman who was a member of a peace commission meeting at Fort Laramie put down in a report that “all [Indians] who cling to their old hunting grounds are hostile and will remain so until killed off... we must take chances and clean out Indians as we encounter them.”<sup>54</sup>

Many of the Americans who walked the trails in the 19<sup>th</sup> century did so with pre-conceived and blatant beliefs that they were culturally and morally superior to the tribes who had lived on the land for countless generations before Christopher Columbus set his sights upon the new world in 1492. Now these new Americans traipsed across lands that their government had no control over and they did so with a dangerous mix of fear and hatred. This fear and hatred led to centuries of social injustices right up to the present day and what had begun as a possibly fruitful relationship between the federal government and the Indian Nations quickly disintegrated into fear, racism, and bloodshed.

The American people continued their expansion across the continent reducing tribe lands to small pockets called reservations, which are scattered throughout the United States and often located, in arid land away from large population centres. With the native people out of sight and out of mind, the American government can ignore their white man's guilt and centuries of calculated and brutal genocide fuelled by a superiority complex and fear. The Native Americans in the present day United States are still a „problem“ to the federal government

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<sup>54</sup> Hawgood, *The American West*, p. 269-70

who have never been to sure how to handle them and their history of grievances. Eventually as a token apology these peoples were granted licences to run casinos and in perhaps an amusing turn are now enjoying themselves taking easy money off the white man who put them in that position.

## 6. A LAND OF ORDINARY HEROES

Men of extraordinary daring and character have travelled along the many trails that crisscross the United States of America seeking both adventure and experience. To Americans everywhere these men embodied the ideals of bravery and adventure that the nation was founded upon during the War of Independence and led to the country going from thirteen states in 1783 when they broke away from the British Empire up to its current fifty states of which the last two, Alaska and Hawaii were acquired in 1959. Today the US is one of the world's leading superpowers with an influence that has spread across the world. American history has always focused on the stories of incredible individuals, pioneers like Lewis and Clark or it has whispered about the horrors that befell the ill-fated Donner Party. US history is indeed littered with adventurers and gunslingers but the fact that most Americans ignore is that it was ordinary families that played the greatest role in shaping the fate of their country. Normal families of men, women, and children with wagons and oxen created the western portion of the United States, as it is known today. Desperation and fear mixed with an unbelievable sense of hope and courage is what defined the American westward trails. It was to be a long and terrible journey, filled with danger at every turn; a mammoth trek done mostly on foot. The American nation owes its thanks to the thousands of migrants who did not seek to embody Manifest Destiny when they set off on their journeys; nor were they looking for adventure or fame. Instead they were simple tales that occurred along the westward trails whether they be called the California, the Oregon, the Mormon, the Santa Fe, the Bozeman, the Gila, the Southern, the El Camino Real or the Old Spanish Trail. Countless tracks made by wagon wheels, driven by hope and desperation, thousands of stories of hardship and joys and the creation of a vibrant coast with world famous cities and a mixed and unique culture. The land west of the Missouri River was the result of the many different

types of people who all shared a common dream of finding their own niche, their own paradise in the west.

Despite the gruelling hardship of the journey and the dream for a brighter future in the west, for many there was no paradise to be found in the west for quite a while after they had reached their destinations. As many arrived off the trails completely destitute it took families many years to create a sustainable livelihood for themselves. The settlements in Oregon City in particular were especially primitive and families huddled together against the winters. Lucy Ann Deady and her family survived on “boiled wheat and boiled peas” during the winter of 1846. Emigrant woman Inez Parker recalled the only shelter her family could get during their first winter in Oregon in 1849 was with another family who had ten children. When emigrants began to flood into Oregon and California in their thousands it was then that these new lands began to see the glimmer of prosperity. Eventually flour mills, lumber mills, water mills and blacksmith foundries were built. Elizabeth Wood who came to Oregon in 1851 remarked, “A lazy person should never think of going to Oregon.” For many families like the Cheney’s the wandering spirit did not abate simply because they arrived in the west. The Cheney’s had arrived in California in 1854 but did not put down permanent roots until 1868, during the intervening years the family moved more than four times in that period.<sup>55</sup> The road to success in the west was a lifelong struggle for many emigrants. Finding that niche to call home was often not simply a matter of reaching the coastal territories but a case of try and try again. Still these emigrants were nothing if not a mixture of hard-working and hopeful. The restless spirits of the overland emigrants built the west while their courage and hope would be the legacy they left behind.

American history however has often focused on the stories and achievements of the white man. To be an American is often to be a mix of many different heritages and have ancestors

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<sup>55</sup> Schlissel, p. 147-8

from all parts of the old world. When you are a native of the land, you are placed in a different category separate from the majority with a history that is not as eagerly recorded. The Native Americans have suffered from inequality from the moment the white man set foot on North America and this has not changed. As of 2013, the United States of America has an estimated population of 315 million people.<sup>56</sup> In a 2010 census, 5.2 million people in the US recognised as being either American Indian or Alaska Native in combination with other races. Of that number, there were 2.9 million people who identified themselves as being solely American Indian or Alaska Native, which is 0.9% of the total population.<sup>57</sup> Modern historians have long argued about the population of the Americans pre-Columbus with estimations ranging vastly, however an accepted figure for the continent, north, and south has been 100 million<sup>58</sup> Estimations of how many lived in North America have ranged from a low 2.1 million, 7 million and a high of 18 million.<sup>59</sup> What befell the native people of the American continent after the Europeans began their colonisation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century has been a source of great shame and embarrassment to the government of the United States. It has been described by many as genocide born of racism and has never been truly apologised for by those in power in the US. People who continue to suppress the history of the Native Americans within the education system.<sup>60</sup> It is time to forget the heroes and monsters whose lives have been half-truth, half-myth, and instead remember the true history beneath the glory; that is a story of hope and desperation, fear and joy, cruelty and beauty and a generation of ordinary people who faced down the barrel of severe hardship with extraordinary courage.

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<sup>56</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, “U.S. Population Clock”, May 2013, <<http://www.census.gov/popclock/>> [Accessed 19 May 2013]

<sup>57</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, “The American Indian and Alaska Native Population,” Jan 2012, <<http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-10.pdf>> [Accessed 19 May 2013]

<sup>58</sup> Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America* (London, 2001), p. 40

<sup>59</sup> Russell Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust and Survival: A Population History since 1492* (Norman, 1990), p. 26-32

<sup>60</sup> Dr Daniel Paul; John Robles, “The genocide of the American Indians was the worst ethnic cleansing in history,” 25 December 2012, <[http://english.ruvr.ru/2012\\_12\\_25/The-genocide-of-the-American-Indians-was-the-worst-ethnic-cleansing-in-history-interview/](http://english.ruvr.ru/2012_12_25/The-genocide-of-the-American-Indians-was-the-worst-ethnic-cleansing-in-history-interview/)> [Accessed 19 May 2013]

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