

EARLY PIONEER FAMILY ALONG THE SOUTHERN ROUTE

George W. and Mary Ann Harris and family crossed the plains by wagon train via the old Oregon Trail arriving in Oregon August 31, 1852. They spent their first winter in the Willamette Valley. The following spring, George set out in search for his dream homestead. They made a donation land claim just north of the Manzanita Rest Stop on Interstate 5. George was born 1820 in Jefferson County, West Virginia and married Mary Ann on February 9, 1843 in Missouri.

According to a book by Percy T. Booth, UNTIL THE LAST ARROW, B&B Publishing, Coos Bay, Oregon, 1997.:

“Leaving Mary Ann and the children with her brother’s family, he rode south through the canyon to the far edge of civilization – the Rogue River Valley. There he found a country unlike any he had ever seen before. As he traveled deeper into southern Oregon, he was amazed at the difference a hundred miles could make. Instead of gentle, flatlands and low, rolling hills, he found layers of rugged mountains, stacked in wild confusion, with little, secret, green valleys hidden in their folds. Cold, clear streams rushed here and there, joined hands, and hurried westward. There was bright, warm sunshine to ripen the grain and grow the grazing grass. And over it all spread vast forests to furnish the logs and lumber to build the homes and heat the cabins and cook the food. And in the forests, game of all kinds was plentiful, more than he had ever seen—more than he had ever hoped for. He looked at it all with amazement, for never in his wildest dreams had he hoped to find a place so near to his liking. Five miles north of the banks of the Rogue River along the Oregon-California Trail he found the place he had been looking for – a mile-long meadowland almost clear of trees and growth. It lay like an emerald dropped in a necklace of heavy timber. Little effort would be needed to clear the ground for seeding. A happy creek wandered through the meadow, chattering a wordless tune.”

WOMAN’S DEFENSE OF HOME SAGA OF WESTERN COURAGE

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October 9, 1855 event

“As the relief party approached Harris’ house, no signs of human occupancy were visible, and an air of desolation lay upon the scene. The outbuildings had been burned, and wreaths of smoke rose slowly from their ruins. Dismounting, some of the party passed within the house. The spectacle that met their eyes was a terrible one. In the room lay the body of the ill-fated owner pierced by a bullet. The signs of determined attack and resistance were visible in the bullet-marked doors and walls. Whatever the termination of the contest, could not be ascertained, and as the party felt that it would be a waste of time to remain, the order was given to mount and push on.

As the cavalcade passed a willow thicket not far from the now abandoned homestead a cry was heard, and a woman, begrimed and disheveled, rushed out, leading a wounded girl by the hand, and implored the aid of the troops. It was Mrs. Harris, who, having with the courage of a lioness, defended her hearth and her family from the attacks of a large party of murderous Indians, had after their withdrawal, taken refuge in the willow copse, and there awaited the arrival of succor. When the troops gathered about her house she had watched with anxious eyes, too far off to distinguish whether they were whites sent to relieve her or red men bent to complete their horrible work. Her story is one of the most extraordinary in the whole range of frontier narrative and forms the leading episode of the terrible massacre, which is now being recounted.

In the Harris domicile resided five persons – Mr. and Mrs. Harris, their two children, Mary [Sophia], a girl of 12, and David, somewhat younger. The fifth was Frank A. Reed. When the first alarm of Indians was given the latter attempted to escape to the woods, but was pursued and killed. His skeleton was found a year afterward.

The boy David, who was at some distance from the house, was last seen running across the field. Subsequent trace of him was never found, but it is supposed that he was murdered, and his body concealed.

Mr. Harris was a few rods from the house when the red skins appeared, and in attempting to retreat to his shelter, was fired at and mortally wounded as he stood upon the threshold of his own door. His wife drew him into the house and closed and barred the door, and obedient to her husband's advice brought the firearms – a rifle, double-barreled shotgun and revolver – and loading them, began to return the fire of the miscreants, who remained close to the house. Her husband was dying in agony the while, and of the two children, one, the boy, was she knew not where, but supposed with reason that he had already met the cruel fate that impended over them all.

The child Mary, had been painfully wounded in the arm, and the terrified sufferer climbed the ladder which led to the attic and there remained for several hours, the mute witness of the terrible conflict.

While the Indians remained in the vicinity they kept beyond the reach of danger from her fire, but repeatedly attempted to cast burning brands upon the roof over her head, intending thereby to cremate all those the house contained.

In an hour, more or less, the husband and father breathed his last, and his bloody corpse with its wide-staring eyes and the expression of agony into which its features were moulded, added ten fold to the terrific nature of the surroundings which confronted the poor and despairing woman.

Through this scene of horror she kept up such an effective resistance as she was able, discharging her firearms in such directions and at such intervals as seemed to intimidate the savages, but probably not succeeding in any case in hitting any of them.

Unfortunately this poor woman, who was suffering so much from the cruelty of her assailants, was not able to revenge herself effectually upon them, for never having fired a gun before, and gaining her knowledge even of how to load one by the instructions of her wounded husband all she could do was to load and fire, hoping that the show of resistance might, as it did, keep her foes at a distance.

She steadily loaded her weapons and discharged them through crevices of the logs of which the house was built, and the Indians, though numerous, dared not attack the building. They burned the outbuilding, however, first removing the horses from the stable.

In the afternoon they decamped, leaving the dauntless woman mistress of the field and the savior of her own and her daughter's life. As soon as she was assured of their departure, she called her daughter down from the loft and with her took refuge in the willow copse, and remained there until the arrival of the relief party, as before said. By them she was removed to a place of safety. “