

**Mrs. Tabitha Brown:  
Senior Citizen on the Applegate Trail; a Founder of Pacific University**

Webber, Bert, Over the Applegate Trail To Oregon in 1846, Webb Research Group Publishers, 1996. Pages 91 – 96.

When it was time to go to Oregon she was 66. If 1846 had been 1996, Tabitha Brown would have been drawing Social Security and plausibly sitting in a rocking chair with her knitting. But such was not the lot of the indomitable Tabitha Brown.

She was the widow of the Rev. Clark Brown an Episcopalian minister who died in 1817. They were natives of Massachusetts. She was the mother-in law of Virgil K. Pringle.

After she became a single mother of three, she taught school in Maryland and in Virginia then she moved with her boys to Missouri in 1825. They settled on a farm in Warren County near the settlement of St. Charles. She started a library and a literary society. It was two years later when Virgil Pringle married Tabitha's daughter Pherne Tabitha Brown.

Mrs. Pringle's brother, Orus Brown had gone to Oregon in 1843 as part of the "Great Migration." He found the new land so pleasant, he returned to Missouri in 1845 to talk the rest of the family into going back with him as his major purpose was to take his wife and their eight children to Oregon.

It seems unlikely that the elder Mrs. Brown, already well established as a positive and forward-moving person, did not quickly agree to the move. Her own brother-in-law, Capt. John Brown, insisted on joining the trek.

Tabitha Brown outfitted herself with a wagon and team of oxen and "a good supply of what was requisite for the comfort of myself, Captain Brown and for my driver," she wrote in 1854.

The senior of this outfit of about forty persons, Captain Brown, 77, crossed the country on horseback.

In 1854, Tabitha Brown, then 75, wrote a letter, from her home in Forest Grove, Oregon, to a brother and sister in the east.

This was a letter of sorrowful reminiscences colored somewhat by her age, and concerned the 1846 overland trip and some of her life after her arrival in Oregon. Of interest, is that Tabitha Brown was one of the founders of Pacific University at Forest Grove.

Extracts from her letter:

***Our journey, with little exception, was pleasing and prosperous until after we passed Fort Hall.***

*Three or four trains of emigrants were decoyed off by a rascally fellow who came out from the settlement in Oregon assuring us that he had found a new cut-off that if we would follow ... we would be in [Willamette Valley] before those who had gone down the Columbia. This was in August. The idea of shortening a long journey caused us to yield to this advice. Our sufferings from that time no tongue can tell. He said he would clear the road before us so that we would have no trouble in rolling our wagons after him. [But he] left us to the depredations of Indians and wild beasts and to starvation. But God was with us.*

*We had sixty miles of desert without grass or water, mountains to climb, cattle giving out, wagons breaking, emigrants sick and dying, hostile Indians to guard against by day and night if we could save ourselves and [animals] from being arrowed or stolen.*

*[We] last nearly all our cattle, passed the Umpqua Mountains, 12 miles through. I rode through in three days at the risk of my life, on horseback, having lost my wagon and all that I had but the horse I was on. Our families were the first that started through the canyon so that we got through the mud and rocks much better than those who followed. After struggling through mud and water up to our horses' sides much of the way in crossing this 12 mile mountain, we opened into the beautiful Umpqua Valley, inhabited only by Indians and wild beasts.*

*Winter had set in and we were yet a long distance from the white settlement. Mr. Pringle and Pherne insisted on my going ahead with Uncle [Captain] John to try to save our lives. They were obliged to stay back a few days to recruit their cattle. They divided up the last bacon, of which I had three slices. I also had a cup full of tea. No bread. We saddled our horses and set off, not knowing if we should see each other again. Captain Brown was too old and feeble to render any assistance to me. I was obliged to ride ahead as a pilot hoping to overtake four or five wagons that had left camp the day before. Near sunset we came upon them. They had nothing to eat and their cattle had given out.*

*We camped in an oak grove for the night and in the morning, I divided my last morsel with them and left them to take care of themselves. We passed beautiful mountains and valleys, saw but two Indians in the distance. In the afternoon, Captain Brown complained of sickness and could only walk his horse at a distance behind. He had a swimming in his head and a pain in his stomach. In two or three hours he became delirious and fell from his horse. I was afraid to jump down from my horse to assist him as it was [a horse] that a woman had never ridden before. He tried to rise up on his feet but could not. I rode close to him and set the end of his cane, which I had in my hand, hard in the ground to help him get up. I urged him to walk a little. He tottered along a few yards and then gave out. I then saw a sunken spot a few steps ahead and led his horse into it and with much difficulty got him raised to the saddle. I told him to hold tight to the horses' mane and I would lead by the bridle. Two miles ahead another mountain to climb over. As we reached the foot of it he was able to take*

*the bridle and we passed safely into a large valley, a wide solitary place, but no wagons in sight.*

*The sun was not setting and the wind was blowing and the rain was drifting upon us. Poor me! I crossed the plain to where three mountain spurs meet. Here night [befell] and I could no longer see the wagon tracks. Alighting from my horse, I flung off the saddle and saddle-pack and tied the horse to a tree with the lasso rope. The captain asked me what I was doing. My answer was, "I am going to camp for the night." He gave a groan and fell to the ground. I [took] my wagon sheet which had been under the saddle, flung it over a projecting limb of a tree and made me a fine tent. I then stripped the Captain's horse and tied him, placed saddle, blankets and bridle under the tent upon the bare ground. His senses were gone. Covering him as well as I could with blankets. I seated myself behind him expecting he would be a corpse before morning.*

Consider Tabitha Brown's situation. She was worse than alone and had an elderly companion at her side who seemed more dead than alive. She was alone in a savage-infested wilderness. She had no food. It was winter weather. She had no fire. She was shivering cold. Heavy clouds even hid the stars and moon.

*All was as solitary as death. But that same king Providence that I had always known was watching over me still.*

*As soon as light dawned, I pulled down my tent, saddled my horse, found the Captain able to stand on his feet. At this moment, one of the emigrants whom I was trying to overtake came up. He was in search of venison. Half-a-mile ahead were the wagons I hoped to overtake. We were soon there and ate plentifully of fresh meat.*

*Within eight feet of where my tent had been were fresh tracks of two Indians but I did not know they were there. They killed and robbed Mr. Newton [November 16] just a short distance off but would not kill his wife because she was a woman.*

*We traveled to the foot of the Calipose [Calapooia] Mountains where my children and grandchildren came up to us, a joyful meeting. They had been near starving. Mr. Pringle tried to shoot a wolf but he was too weak and trembling to hold the rifle steady. The children all cried because they had nothing to eat, but just then their own son came with a supply and all cried again. Winter had now set in. We were many days crossing the Calipose Mountain able to go ahead only a mile or so a day. The road had to be cut and opened before us and the mountain was covered with snow.*

*Provisions gave out and Mr. Pringle set out on horseback to the settlements for relief, not knowing how long he would be away. In a week or so our scanty provisions were gone and we were again in a state of starvation. Many tears were shed by all save one.*

*Tabitha Brown was not one to cry. She had passed through many trials that convinced her that tears avail nothing. In all the troubles crossing the plains, especially on the*

*southern route, she had never cried or thought she would not live to reach a settlement. She called it faith.*

*As a last resort to avoid starvation, Clark, Pringle's eldest son, shot one of his father's best working oxen and dressed it for food. It had no fat on it so sparse had been the grass along the way. "Grandma" Brown, as she was often called, described the scant meal as "something to eat – poor bones to pick without bread or salt."*

It occurs that Orus Brown's party, that proceeded into the Willamette Valley by the northern Columbia River route, had arrived in September. Soon after Orus learned of the sufferings of the emigrants to the south, he set off in haste with a relief expedition of four pack horses and provisions. He met Mr. Pringle, who had left us in search of relief. Together they headed south and in a few days were at the camp. They arrived at night to find everyone resting in tents.

*On the stillness of night, the footsteps of horses clomping through the brush and trees was heard. Directly there was a 'halloo.' These were the voices of Orus and Virgil Pringle. You can realize the joy! Orus, by his persuasive insistence, encouraged us to more effort to reach the settlement. In five miles we fell into the company of half-breed French and Indians with packhorses. We hired six of them and pushed ahead again. As provisions were again becoming short, we were once more on an allowance until we reach the first settlers. There, our hardest struggle ended.*

*On Christmas day at 2 p.m. I entered the house of a Methodist minister. The first house I had set my feet in for nine months.*

*For two or three weeks of my journey down the Willamette [valley], I had felt something in the end of my glove finger which I supposed to be a button but I found it to be a 6 ¼ (cent) piece. This was the whole of my cash capital to commence business with in Oregon. With it I purchased 3 needles. I traded off some of my old clothes to the squaws for buckskin, worked them into gloves for the Oregon ladies and gentlemen which cleared me upwards of \$30.*