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NEW HORIZONS ON OLD TRAILS: A REVIEW ESSAY

MERRILL J. MATTES

THE PLAINS ACROSS: THE OVERLAND EMIGRANTS AND THE TRANS-MISSISSIPPI WEST, 1840-60. By John D. Unruh, Jr. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979. Pp. 565. Illus., notes, bibliog. \$22.50.

WOMEN AND MEN ON THE OVERLAND TRAIL. By John Mack Faragher. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. Pp. 281. Notes, bibliog. \$17.50.

THE ROAD TO CALIFORNIA: THE SEARCH FOR A SOUTHERN OVERLAND ROUTE, 1540-1848. By Harlan Hague. Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1978. Pp. 313. Notes, bibliog.

THE FIRST TIME I MET JOHN WAYNE was as a teen-age tourist in 1930 in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where he was making his first movie. (He was going by his real name then, "Duke" Morrison.) The picture was *The Big Trail*, and it was, of course, about covered wagons on the Oregon Trail, with Wayne as the bronzed, buck-skinned guide. While admiring the scenery and the star's masculinity, I thought there were two things wrong here. First, what was the Oregon Trail doing in Jackson Hole? Secondly, wouldn't a real wagon train guide be a grizzled and bearded old mountain man instead of this smooth young Apollo?

The second time I met John Wayne was as a park planner in Alaska in 1969. By that time both of us were somewhat grizzled ourselves, and he was once more "on the trail." But this time he had a sea-going yacht in Glacier Bay, he was on vacation, and he told me he wanted to climb the nearby Chilkoot trail of 1898 fame. In four decades many images, including that of oneself, shift and blur, but some things remain constant. Among these are taxes, sunrise and sunset, John Wayne as a "western" immortal, the fascination of old historic trails—and the romantic garbage that is strewn along them.

Popular writers of novels or entertainment scripts are seldom interested in fidelity to historical facts, whether of character, chronology, or setting. In popular imagery "General" Custer still stands there waving his sword at the encircling Sioux, Sacagawea and her papoose lead the way to the Pacific, and the Oregon Trail wends its way past (and presumably over) the Teton Mountains.

On the whole, professional historians (as distinct from popularizers and fictioneers) have *not* done a good job of combatting misconceptions about the frontier, particularly the overland migration phase. In their textbooks they tend to dismiss the subject with a few pivotal dates and generalizations, or else they publish meticulously-researched monographs and articles that are read mainly by other professional historians. This is unfortunate, not only because young students grow up confused by prevailing half-truths and distortions, but because

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the unadorned documentable historical facts, capably presented, are no less inspiring, and, indeed, they are more exciting than the hollowness and frumpiness of fiction. There are encouraging signs that at last something is being done about this.

While no western concept evokes richer imagery than "the Oregon Trail," there is none so riddled with errors. It may require a visit to Jackson Hole to convince you that only a fool would have tried to take a wagon over Teton Pass; but even a mild interest in historical geography would result in your discovery that the Oregon Trail crossed the Continental Divide seventy-five miles southeast thereof, at a place called South Pass. There was a reason why at least nine out of ten emigrants going westward through what is now the continental United States went through South Pass, regardless of origins east, or destinations west. The reason was the iron dictate of geography. This was an abnormally low point in the Divide, broader than any boulevard, and there was just one river system that led straight to it, namely the Platte, the North Platte, and the Sweetwater. If you were spiritually inclined you could say that God designed this "Way West." Whether you came from New England, New York, New Jersey, the Carolinas, Wisconsin, Iowa, Missouri, Arkansas, or any state in between, if you went overland to Oregon, California, Utah, Colorado, or Montana, you jumped off somewhere along the Missouri River and headed straight for the Platte, via present Nebraska and Wyoming.

The fraction who followed a land route within the United States other than the Platte did so through New Mexico and Arizona, reaching them by either Texas or the Santa Fe Trail from the east, and following the lower Gila River to California. These minority travelers would of course be from Texas or the Gulf States, true-blue Southerners who patriotically stuck with "the southern route" despite its desert aridity and its awkward lack of definition. (Even so there are numerous instances of Mississippians, Alabamans, Georgians, and even Texans taking the Platte route, usually via steamboat from New Orleans.)

This reviewer has calculated that from 1841 to 1858 a total of about 250,000 emigrants traveled up the Platte. (This period was essentially the Oregon-Utah-California phase, before Colorado and Montana became full-blown rival Eldorados. This would allow, generously, 25,000 who migrated directly through the American Southwest to California. Another 250,000 plus or minus may have reached the West Coast by sailing around the Horn, or sailing combined with a traverse of Nicaragua, Panama, or Mexico.

There was a "northern route" which was the one Lewis and Clark blazed by following the Missouri River to Three Forks, but they had the Devil's own time crossing the Rocky Mountains to reach a navigable branch of the Columbia River. During the California gold rush a few may have attempted the northern route by pack train, but there is no record of anyone succeeding in taking wagons across prior to completion of "the Mullan Road" in 1860, a symbolic act by the U.S. Army Engineers. So when we talk about the covered wagon migrations, essentially we are talking about the consolidated Platte route from Fort Kearny on the 100th meridian to South Pass, albeit with unravellings at both ends.

Historians have had a lazy habit of referring to the Platte route as "the Oregon Trail," and the public has been taken in by this verbal sloppiness. Yes, Gertrude,

there *was* a bona fide trail to Oregon, right up the Platte and its tributaries; and after following the Snake or Lewis Fork of the Columbia it continued across arid plains and the Blue Mountains to go down the Columbia River (or across the Cascade Mountains) to the fabled Willamette Valley. But what has happened to the term "Oregon Trail" is an illustration of how the social sciences get a bad name. Only for a few years, 1841-1846, was Oregon the primary emigrant destination. In 1847-1848 the Mormons bound for Great Salt Lake held center stage. And of course in 1849 and for ten years thereafter it was the California Road or Trail via Humboldt River to the great majority. Those who through the 1850s ignored the gold rush and stubbornly kept to Oregon were still entitled to call their way "the Oregon Trail," but respectable historians are not properly entitled to say that anyone followed the Oregon Trail to California!

There was, in fact, a plethora of trails, including the Mormon Trail or Council Bluff Road, the St. Joe and Independence Roads, the Pike's Peak or Denver Road, the Pony Express and stage routes, and the Fort Leavenworth to Fort Laramie Military Road. In a misguided effort to provide some cohesion to this verbal anarchy historians re-invented the Oregon Trail, causing more confusion than ever. To remedy this chaotic state of affairs, this reviewer has urged the adoption of "Great Platte River Road" because that central route was precisely the one common denominator of all these routes until the 1869 wedding of the rails which made transcontinental wagon roads obsolete. (It was even the common denominator of the Colorado or Pike's Peak Gold Rush, except that those Argonauts switched off to the South Platte.) It is pleasant to observe that "Platte River Road" is beginning to crop up in newer publications; hopefully, in time the inflated "Oregon Trail" will be restored to its proper regional role.

This was one breakthrough, but there have been others. George R. Stewart's *Trail to California* (New York, 1962) restored order to amateur chaos by demonstrating the trial-and-error evolution of trail-making before one primary emigrant route from South Pass to Sacramento was generally adopted. Dale R. Morgan focused attention on the peculiar but vital role of *The Humboldt: Highroad of the West* (New York, 1943) and edited two works woven around emigrant journals—*The Overland Diary of James A. Pritchard . . . 1849* (Denver, 1959) and *Overland in 1846*, 2 vols. (Georgetown, California, 1963) which analyzed, in unprecedented depth, the historical implications as well as the nuts and bolts of two salient migration years. These books have been sufficiently penetrating and dynamic to influence scholarly re-thinking, and crack old mental molds.

The cracks are widening. Now we have on hand three new works that in greater or less degree further open up new vistas in our understanding and interpretation of the westward movement. The most profound and significant of these, which should shatter the last vestiges of stereotyped thinking about "the Oregon Trail," is John Unruh's *The Plains Across*. John Faragher in his *Women and Men* takes an unprecedented look at the differential sex roles in the process of crossing a continent. Unruh and Faragher confined their studies to the great central or Platte River route because that was, so to speak, where the action was. (It is encouraging to note their stress on the generic term "overland trail.")

Way back in 1925 Ralph P. Bieber wrote an article on "The Southwestern Trails to California in 1849" (*Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 12). In 1954

LeRoy Hafen wrote a book on *The Old Spanish Trail* (Glendale, California) from Santa Fe to Los Angeles via Utah, a route used by both traders and emigrants. There have been numerous books presenting the adventures of various Argonaut journalists and their routes through the Southwest (e.g., *The Gila Trail* by B. B. Harris, Norman, Oklahoma, 1960). Odie R. Faulk in his *Destiny Road: The Gila Trail and the Opening of the Southwest* (New York, 1973) covers the emigrant period in eighteen pages. Ferrol Egan's *The Eldorado Trail* (New York, 1970) goes exhaustively into gold routes via Old Mexico, but if there has been any comparable broad general interpretation of Southwest American emigrant trails to California it has escaped our attention. Harlan Hague's *Road to California* is not an update on gold rush emigrant routes through the Southwest, but a history of various Spanish, Mexican, and unofficial American efforts over three centuries to find some feasible way of simply getting from Santa Fe to California. These efforts were spasmodic, often secretive, and with little in the way of cumulative scientific knowledge. When the Forty-Niners did arrive in that quarter they benefitted mainly from the last-minute exploration of official Americans—soldiers bent on conquest.

Unruh's book is easily the most important one ever written on the subject of overland migration. That is simply because it is the only one written to date which by virtue of exhaustive research adequately covers the vast scope and depth of the subject. The geographical scope is continental in terms of both source materials consulted and the migrant territory covered, i.e., from New England and Washington, D.C., to California and Oregon. The chronological scope is limited to the two ante-bellum decades, but this was the time of the great storybook migrations to Oregon, California, and Utah. The only way to characterize the profundity of this work is to say that the research is massive, the organization of the material is highly original and imaginative, and its interpretation sweeping and brilliant.

One might say that as a landmark publication *The Plains Across* is to emigration literature like Hiram M. Chittenden's time-honored *American Fur Trade* is to that period, or Robert Utley's *Frontiersmen in Blue* and *Frontier Regulars* (New York, 1967 and 1973) are to the Plains Indian wars. He has elevated his subject above mere romance to full recognition of its dynamic national significance.

In a remarkable introduction Unruh reviews the work of previous historians of the overland epic. This is probably the most thorough critique of the subject in print. He gently points out the many shortcomings and inadequacies of most studies, and the limited virtues of a relative few. His own work, in effect, seeks to remedy gross deficiencies in the literature. If he had failed in his self-imposed mission his critique might have seemed to some authors to be overbearing and, in some instances, unfair. Since he has in fact succeeded in his Herculean effort the critique may be accepted graciously as the impartial findings of an eminently qualified judge.

In ten chapters Unruh deals with eight major sub-themes: public perceptions of emigration prospects, emigrant motivations and preparations, the broad spectrum of emigrants relating to each other, their dealings with and attitudes

toward Indians, the role of the federal government, the contributions of suppliers, traders and other entrepreneurs, the relationship of Mormons to emigrating non-Mormons, and emergency assistance extended by Oregon and California residents to emigrants in trouble. Each of these topics is treated broadly in terms of changes that evolved over the two decades in question, and in the rich documented detail of literally thousands of cases. (There are more than 1500 foot-notes here, and at least half of these cover multiple references.) A chapter on "The Overlanders in Historical Perspective" is a final summing up and a gathering of loose ends. The entire achievement gives the appreciative reader the feeling of reaching a mountaintop and gazing in wonder at enchanting new horizons.

In a footnote Faragher concedes that *The Plains Across* is "a major scholarly work," but then he downgrades it as "having a dry as dust approach that characterizes too much of overland trail history." No judgment could be more inaccurate or more unfair. Given the challenge of juggling the vast array of particulars to support his massive thesis, Unruh's prose is of high literary quality, entirely commensurate with the grandeur of his panoramic canvas.

The editors have provided a wealth of well-selected and properly-credited illustrations. There are nine original well-drafted maps which are indispensable to the reader's grasp of the complex geography involved. The author conjured up ten well-researched statistical tables covering emigrant floating populations, Indian-related fatalities, prices paid for trading post supplies, and average travel times from the Missouri River to California and Oregon. Finally, there are thirty-four pages of double column bibliography, including several hundred overland journals and recollections, rivalling in scope the forty-eight page bibliography appended to *Great Platte River Road* (Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, 1969 and 1979).

Faragher has three things in common with Unruh—recognition of the centrality of the overland route, extensive eyewitness testimony, and a clever inversion of words to provide intriguing titles. *Plains Across* is a catch phrase adapted from a contemporary ballad. *Women and Men* purposely reverses the traditional order to focus on the ostensible theme—relationships between the sexes in the antebellum West as revealed in personal travel narratives. Unfortunately Faragher has an underlying motive that impairs his objectivity. He wants to demonstrate how badly women were used in the 19th century to generate masculine guilt to help the swing of the pendulum in the opposite direction. He has a wealth of data, but he occasionally misuses or misreads them to hammer on his argument for a totality of equal rights now. *Women and Men* is thus as much a sociological treatise as a historical theme. His frank but dubious justification is that "only the radical perspectives of feminism can provide the concepts necessary to reconstruct our past."

After allowance is made for his occasional slanting of interpretations or downplaying of evidence to support his sustained indignation, one may read Faragher profitably because his is the first book-length study of any aspect of emigrant behavior, bias or no bias. He examines the Midwestern farm family of 1850 as data background, which is fair enough, because the bulk of overlanders were

from the upper Mississippi Valley states. Quoting liberally from overland journals and recollections he catalogs typical male and female roles and family patterns; the range of trail experiences both routine and stressful; and underlying assumptions, attitudes, mores, conflicts, and hypocrisies. There are also some interesting statistical tables about places of origin, occupations, median ages, family cycles, and sex ratios (as low as 1 woman to 16 men in 1850; if he had included 1849 it would have been at the ratio of 1 to 50!).

Harlan Hague is not at all concerned with sex on the Oregon Trail or anywhere else. As a matter of fact his epic story of exploration and re-exploration is almost exclusively a masculine affair involving Indian chiefs, padres, conquistadores, merchants, and fur trappers. He ends his narrative just on the eve of the California gold rush so he has nothing to say about American emigrants themselves. However, what California migration there was through the Southwest in 1849 and thereafter theoretically benefitted in some degree by the painful lessons learned by others over 300 years. The Forty-Niners, according to Hague, generally used the route finally worked out by Colonel Philip St. George Cooke, his scouts, and his Mormon Battalion from Santa Fe to California in 1846-1847 via San Bernadino, Tucson, and Yuma, and as modified by Major Graham's march of 1848 via Santa Cruz. This involved a brief dip into Mexican Sonora. (To what extent Americans may have attempted to avoid stepping over the international boundary after 1848 is not suggested in this study.)

The bulk of *The Road to California* is a careful recitation of all known efforts by Imperial Spain, the Republic of Mexico, and free-lance American trappers to develop a decent route from Santa Fe to Southern California. The emphasis is on "search" rather than "find," on frustration, defeat, and retrogression rather than cumulative success. In primitive terms, the Southwestern climate was debilitating, the terrain was harsh and bewildering, the natives were either uncomprehending, uncooperative, or hostile. It is not the fault of the author that his book is difficult to read. It is because the subject, so quirky and episodic, lacks continuity. It becomes a chore to keep track of the Spanish names, the Indian tribes, the hazy horizons. This is not bedtime reading. It is essentially a book for scholars and specialists in Southwestern frontier exploration.

Hague has done for the "southern overland route" what George Stewart did for the main central route (or routes) to California. However, there is an attention-differential problem here because the Great Migration mainly followed the central route, with only a relative trickle on the southern route. Thus the central route is bathed in retrospective glory, so to speak, while the southern route was something to be gotten over with and then forgotten about, as far as most travelers were concerned. All the more credit to Hague, therefore, for tackling a difficult but important subject of keen regional interest.

John Wayne has been immortalized because of the all-American hero image that he so convincingly projected. To a large degree that image is the elemental one of the western pioneer—whether emigrant, Indian-fighter, stage driver, or

cowboy. No scholar can hope to be so remembered by posterity, but all scholars have an obligation to seek unswervingly for historical truth. To the extent they achieve this, in research, writing, or teaching, they are heroes of their profession, whether sung or unsung.

The three works reviewed have opened up new vistas of scholarship, inviting other truth-seekers to pursue further exploration of old trails—for new perspectives of interpretation, or topical syntheses emerging from the lately discovered Mother Lode of eye-witness detail. A heroic phase of the frontier West has now been brought into sharper focus. Hopefully, this will lead to a new wave of vigorous inquiry and creative writing at a time when the nation desperately needs fresh reminders of its heritage.

NEW REPRINT PROGRAM

With the kind intervention of friends of New Mexico history, Senate Bill #8 was passed by the State Legislature during the 1980 session. The Board of Editors wishes to acknowledge the help of Advisory Editor Alice King, Senators Alex Martinez and Don King, and friends Bennie Aragon and Max Roybal, who reflect strongly their dedication to the study of important aspects of the State's unique history.

Under terms of this \$50,000 appropriation, a publication program will make again available the now out-of-print issues of the NEW MEXICO HISTORICAL REVIEW. A special provision of the law provides to any public high school or junior high school a free copy of any of the reprinted issues, such reprint to be incorporated into the school library. Upon application to the REVIEW, and subject to the foregoing conditions, any such school may receive the REVIEWS reprinted under this law.

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