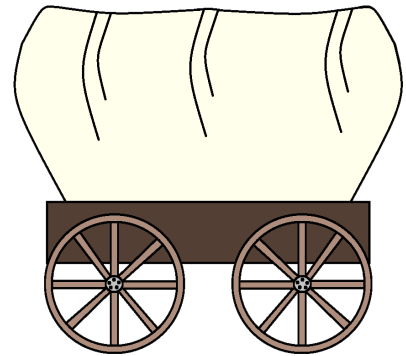


# Journals, Diaries, and Letters Written by Women on the Oregon Trail 1836-1865

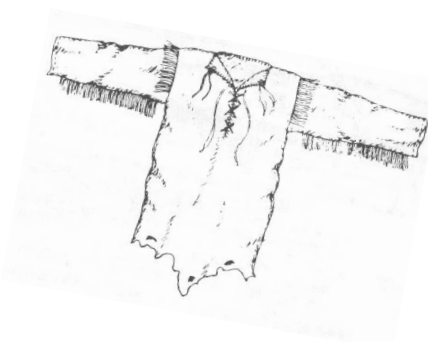
By Barbara McPherson Burgess  
B.A., Colorado College, 1959

The lifestyle of the Indians of Idaho and Oregon interested the emigrant women. Their diaries and journals contain observations and descriptions of the treatment and dress of Indian children, the foods grown, hunted, and cooked by the Indians, and the Indian dances. Narcissa Whitman was moved to pity when she saw an Indian infant whose head was being flattened. In 1836 she wrote, "I saw an infant here (at Cascades) whose head was in the pressing machine. It



was a pitiful sight. Its mother took great satisfaction in unbinding and showing its naked head to us. The child lay upon a board between which and its head was a squirrel skin. On its forehead laid a small square cushion, over which a bandage drawn tight around pressing its head again the board. In this position it is kept three or four months, or longer, until the head becomes a fashionable shape... I saw a child about a year- old whose head had been recently released from its pressure as I suppose from its looks. All the back part of it was a purple color as if it had been sadly bruised. We are told this custom is wearing away very fast, there is only a few tribes on this river who practice it."

Charlotte Pangra was annoyed by another activity of some Indians who were camped near the ferry on the Snake River. Charlotte wrote, "We had an all night serenade buy the Indians who have a shade a few rods up the river. They sang or chanted and gabled for Mockingsons leggings and such things all night keeping us awake much."



A few of the journal writers became involved with Indians they met on the trail. Myra Eel Is and Mary Walker sewed dresses for many of the Indian wives of the fur traders in the caravan and at the rendezvous in Wyoming. Eliza Spalding work to put the Nez Perces' language in written form at the mission in the Oregon Territory.

Elizar McAuley became friends with an Indian she met at Smith's Fork of the Bear River while the men in her party were building a new road. Eliza wrote, "1852. At dinner time a very intelligent Indian named Poro came to our camp. He says he has been to the Missouri River and seen steamboats and explained by signs what they were like. He seems to understand the customs of the whites very well. In the afternoon he came again, bringing his little boy, four or five years old. He interpreted a number of Indian words for us... Poro visited us again and brought his friend Pavee to see us. Old Poro came along about ten o'clock and stayed a long time, teaching us his language. It pleases him very much to see us try to learn it. Poro came twice today to bid us goodbye and feels very sad about our going."

## FUR TRADERS AND MOUNTAIN MEN

The women on the trail were curious about these mountain men who lived in the wilderness among the Indians. In their journals the first white women on the trail described the fur traders and their Indian wives with whom the missionaries traveled.

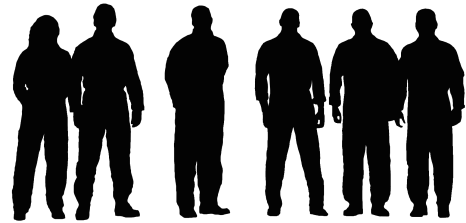


The missionaries who were going to Oregon to live among and serve the Indians were interested in the Indian women who traveled with the fur traders' caravan. Sarah Smith described the wives of Captain Dripps, "Several female Indians are journeying with us. The two wives of Captain Dripps. They are trimmed off in high style, I assure you. The oldest wife rides a beautiful white horse, her saddle ornamented with beads and many little gingles. A beautiful white sheepskin covering the horse, cut in fringes one/half a yard deep, ornamented with collars and a great number of thimbles pierced in the top and hung to the Tinge like little balls, making a fine gingle as she rides along. Then comes the rider with her scarlet blanket, painted face, and a handkerchief on her head, sitting astride. This is the fashion of the country. The second wife acts as an attendant."

Laziness, dirtiness, and ignorance were the three main criticisms which the missionary women directed at the fur traders' Indian wives. Sarah summed up her opinions in her

journal. "Last eve we received a call from one of the wives of some fur trader. She was dressed in fine style. Perhaps her dress cost 100 dollars. It was trimmed in beads and other ornaments throughout and beads of a costly kind about her neck. Her dress was mountain sheepskin, white and soft as kid... I certainly never saw so much ornament but it all showed the barrenness of her mind. It is said these trappers take great pleasure in dressing their Indian brides but care not for their minds.

Sarah also described the Jim Brudger trading party which they met in Wyoming.



"Received a salute from some of Bridger's party who have just arrived. This company consists of about 100 men and perhaps 60 Indian females and a great number of half-breed children. Their arrival was attended with firing of guns and noisy shouts. Their appearance was rude - and savage, were painted in a most hideous manner."