

The Oregon Trail



1852 was a standout year for American emigration. Thousands if not tens of thousands took advantage of a treaty engineered by Thomas Fitzpatrick Broken Hand which all but eliminated the danger of Indian attacks, allowing pioneers to safely cross the Indian territories and head west. Eyewitness accounts of that year testified to wagon trains that stretched out to the horizon "as far as the eye could see." My daughter-in-law's 5th great granduncle (Thomas Banks) and 5th great grandaunt (Suzannah Jarvis Banks) happened to be in one of those wagons.

Thomas, having been drafted into the war of 1812, survived by paying another young man to serve in his stead. The young man unfortunately became a casualty of that war while Thomas, newly married with children, moved to his father's home in Kentucky and then further west to Arkansas where he started a lumber business.

And then came 1852 and the promise of opportunity. Now 68 years old, Thomas Banks sold his mill in Arkansas and after gathering his wife and sons (along with other family members), he joined a train of 102 Conestoga wagons which were making their way west towards the promised land of Oregon. And while Indian attacks indeed did not occur, that did not mean the journey wasn't fraught with peril. Neither Thomas nor Suzannah would survive the trip.

The real enemy turned out to be disease. It was most likely cholera that caused the deaths of so many emigrants along the Oregon Trail. Suzannah died first, in September of 1852. She was buried along the banks of the Burnt River. Thomas followed his wife a month later and was buried beside the Umatilla River. Years later attempts were made to find their gravesites but the temporary markers that were originally used had long since disappeared.

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