History of the Barlow Road

Author(s): William Barlow and Mary S. Barlow


Published by: Oregon Historical Society

Stable URL: [https://www.jstor.org/stable/20609521](https://www.jstor.org/stable/20609521)
Quite a remarkable coincidence in name and purpose is evident from the facts that Dr. Samuel K. Barlow of Massachusetts was the first man to propose a transcontinental railroad across the Rocky Mountains, and that Samuel K. Barlow of Kentucky, a generation later, proposed and executed the first wagon road over the Cascade Mountains, thus completing the circuit of one third of the land circumference of the globe. The life action of the latter fully realized the thought of the former.

Samuel Kimbrough Barlow was of Scotch descent and was imbued with the spirit of that type of men who fear not. In 1844 he worked with might and main to elect the great Kentuckian, whom the nation failed to honor. Failure with Mr. Barlow was not despair, but renewed and tactful ardor. He was a whole emergency corps in himself. The nation failed to elect Clay, so Mr. Barlow declared his determination to go where he could not feel the force of the failure.

Illinois became the stepping stone to the final goal—Oregon. S. K. Barlow was captain of one of the large immigration companies of 1845. Five thousand men, women, and children moved out of Independence, Missouri, westward bound, armed with the spirit of the name of the lonely little town left behind. There were about one thousand wagons, all under the leadership of Dr. William Welch. But independence soon prevailed and each little company became a law unto itself. At Fort
Hall about half the wagons parted from those destined for California and continued on without unusual incident to The Dalles, Oregon. This was the supposed terminus of the wagon road for all time. An Indian trail was known and used by many for the transportation of household goods, etc., by pack horses, or for cattle droves, but no man had been courageous enough to undertake the supposed impossible journey. Captain Barlow was outspoken in his determination to try the untried mountain passes. He said: "God never made a mountain that He had not made a place for some man to go over it or under it. I am going to hunt for that place, but I ask no one who feels in the least the force of the word 'can't' to accompany me." Members of his own family had implicit faith in his ability to find what he sought, so did not hesitate to follow. The Barlows had plenty of provisions to last two months, their cattle and horses were in good condition, and there was money enough to furnish any comfort necessary for a continuance of the time and distance if courage sanctioned inclination.

At last the start was made, about the first of October, 1845. Those who signified their willingness to try the untried with Mr. Barlow were his wife, Susannah Lee, his eldest son William, aged twenty-two, James and John Lawson Barlow, two younger sons, Mrs. Sarah Barlow-Gaines, her husband, Albert Gaines, and their two daughters, now Mrs. Rhinehart of Seattle, and Mrs. G. B. Curry of La Grande, and Miss Jane Barlow, afterwards Mrs. A. F. Hedges. Those who joined the Barlows were William Rector and wife, Mr. Gessner and wife, J. C. Caplinger and wife, John Bacon, William Berry, and several children. The entire party numbered nineteen men and women, besides children. Their able assistants were seven horses, thirteen wagons, sixteen yoke of cattle, and one dog. The party drove to Five
HISTORY OF THE BARLOW ROAD. 73

Mile Creek, where water and grass were plentiful for stock, and here they halted several days for rest and repairs.

During the stay here Samuel K. Barlow left for a reconnoitering trip. A low sink was observed from the Blue Mountains, and to that point the observing pioneer directed his attention. After several days' absence, he returned full of dauntless courage to proceed. Mr. Wm. H. Rector then volunteered to accompany Mr. Barlow and help make the preliminary surveys of the untried route. "You are just the man I need," Mr. Barlow said. "You are young, stout, and resolute; so come right along." The teams were in fine condition, hopes were buoyant, and "On, on," were the watchwords. The provisions and tools were divided so all could fare alike, we started. A drive of twenty-five or thirty miles brought us to Tygh Valley, where we rested a day and prepared for the trying ordeal of the next few days. From our captain's report we knew a long hill, a deep canyon, and a long stretch of dry land lay in front of us. The old gent quietly determined to take us beyond these barriers himself, feeling that once beyond them, the memory would not only deter us from a desire of retracing our steps, but rather encourage a forward movement. Plenty of wood and water would then be on every hand. At this point it was determined that Mr. Barlow and Mr. Rector should leave us for another contemplated reconnoitering movement. Armed with an ax, a gun, a few blankets, light provisions, and plenty of resolute will, the two pathfinders struck out to strike the first steel blade into the primeval forest of the Cascade Mountains. The remainder of the party was divided into two forces; one, a working party of about ten men and boys, was to cut out the road after the blazers; the other, composed of the women and children and two boys to assist, was to follow the road.
builders. The greatest deficiency we felt was the lack of good tools. Old rusty axes and saws, young and tender muscles, and big trees were quite incompatible. But pluck and necessity compelled action, so we hacked away and went on. The east side of the Cascades is but slightly timbered; our teams passed around and under the pine and hemlock trees with ease, but on the west side the trees were thick and the underbrush made every yard or foot even an impassable barrier to our wagons, till ax, saw, or fire demolished or burned the barriers away.

Days and weeks passed and no tidings of the road hunters came. Our men had cut to the head or source of the Little Des Chutes River, close to Mount Hood. The wagons had advanced but twelve miles. We stopped at the long but not very steep hill and waited for the road hunters to return to give us hopeful prospects, for we did not wish to descend it for fear we might have to ascend it again if the flat were to be, "Thus far and no farther."

The spot where we waited and rested was most beautiful. But for our anxiety for the absent pathfinders, our fears of the winter snows coming on, and the fast diminishing supply of what we considered our ample supply of provisions, we should have enjoyed the panorama like a Mazama. Our anxiety was of short duration, however, for about dark a few days after our halt rifle shots heralded the approach of those whom we awaited. The return salute from half a dozen rifles made the woods ring for miles around. "Tallow" were lighted and men, women, and children went with a rush to meet the stalwart pioneers and learn the fate of future movements. Greetings over, the first thing the old gent said was, "Don't give us much to eat; a little coffee must be food and stimulant too." Mr. Rector said: "Speak for yourself, Barlow; I am going to eat whatever my
good wife will cook for me at this late hour. You
would not let me eat those big snails, nor eat you, so
now I'm going to do as I please.' Mrs. Rector, how-
ever, did not please to be over lavish in her supply for
that meal, so no disaster followed.

In the morning all gathered around to hear the result
of the advance expedition. Mr. Rector spoke first and
said: ‘We have found a good route for a road, but it
will be a very hazardous journey this time of the year.
I dread the possibility of the danger for my wife, so we
have concluded to return to The Dalles.’ Mr. Barlow,
wishing to allay fear and dread on the part of others,
spoke quickly, ‘Mr. Rector, you are at liberty to do as
you please. If I had any fears of losing any of my com-
pany on account of the road, I would not say ‘Go’ to
any of them; but I know we can go on from here and
reach the summit of the Cascades, the mountains we
have started in to overcome. If we can not go on from
there we will build a cache for our surplus wagons and
baggage and leave two of our trusty young men to guard
them. We, ourselves, will follow the trail we have just
made, and soon reach the civilization of the Northwest.’

All except Mr. Rector and wife determined to advance,
and preparations began at once. Wm. Berry and Wm.
Barlow agreed to take charge of the wagons until the
condition of the weather and road would permit their
being brought out.

It was now late in November. The snow was liable
to blockade us at any day, so it was decided to send the
cattle over the Indian trail at once. Wm. Barlow was
to accompany James A. Barlow and John L. Barlow over
the mountain as far as the main Sandy road. Here he
would procure what supplies he could and return to the
hungry men and women in the mountains. The old
Indian trail was marked out by the Indians regardless
of altitude and snow, which to them were not such insurmountable barriers as the trees and underbrush. Their tomahawks and scalping knives were not sufficient to cut away logs and trees, so they went around them. When they came to a log they could not avoid, they hacked a notch in it just deep and wide enough for their adroit little ponies to jump over. These narrow passes often caused damage, and even death, to many cattle.

We were two days in going over Mount Hood trail. Leaving the young men on the established road to Foster's, Wm. Barlow returned to camp and assisted in building a safe and snug cache for the goods and a cabin for the men who were to care for all the emigrants' worldly goods that winter. On account of the limited supply of food, it was decided that Wm. Berry should remain alone and await the return of Wm. Barlow, the writer, in January. Wagons were worth from $150 to $200 in the valley, and twenty wagons were indispensable to the pioneers at any price. Captain Barlow packed the horses snugly with women, children, and provisions and started over the last and most dangerous part of the route—the coastal side of the Cascades. Then it was that hard times came. Whortleberry swamps confronted us frequently, and many a time all had to wade through them, as the horses mired with the least load upon them. The best time we could make was from three to five miles a day. A snowstorm coming on covered the ground with a foot of snow, leaving nothing for our horses to eat except laurel, which was supposed to be poisonous. Something caused the death of one of our few horses. The hams were cut out and saved for an emergency. Mrs. Caplinger and some of the others became much disheartened and moaned the fate of "doubly dying" of starvation and cold. Mrs. Gaines, Mr. Barlow's oldest child, laughed at their fears and said, "Why, we are in the midst of
plenty,—plenty of snow, plenty of wood to melt it, plenty of horse meat, plenty of dog meat if the worst comes.” Notwithstanding this courageous spirit it was deemed best to send John M. Bacon and Wm. Barlow on foot into Foster’s settlement for more supplies. Mr. Bacon had been an indispensable man all along the route, as he was a tailor by trade, and his needle was always busy on clothing or harness.

We started out with our scanty quota of coffee and four small biscuits. A dull chopping ax was the only tool that could be spared for our purposes. We knew the necessity of haste. With snow over everything but the poison laurel, our horses were forced to eat it and die, or to starve and die. Then came the thought of our families having to eat the flesh of poisoned horses, possibly to die from its effects; or, if they lived, to walk out over the snow and barely exist on scanty allowance. We therefore went down Laurel Hill like “shot off of a shovel,” and in less time than two hours we had to look back to see the snow. We soon struck the Big Sandy trail and our troubles were over. The only danger was in crossing the stream so many times. In many places we found drift or boulders for stepping stones, but at one place we had to chop down a big tree and take the chance on its falling on a small rock in the middle of the turbulent water. The chance was lost, for the tree broke as it fell and washed away. We then concluded to prepare a good supper of coffee and biscuits. But poor John drew a long breath and said, “Will, I’m sorry and ashamed to tell you that I lost those four biscuits in the stream. I slipped and fell in stepping on a boulder, and away went the bread and I could not catch it.” I never really suspected that John ate them, but for fun replied, “I thought it would be hard to catch anything on its way to a hungry man’s breadbasket.”
In the morning I determined to cross that stream. I cut a ten-foot vaulting pole, and placing it firmly on the bottom among the boulders, I braced myself against it and sprang. I reached the island. Again I ventured to reach the opposite shore, and surprised myself by succeeding. There were no flags or horns to herald approval, but Bacon's cheers and my own feelings of victory, and what it meant to my mother, father, all in the mountains, were sufficient. I sang "good-bye" to Bacon, and bounded away to Foster's, eight miles further on, for food and rescue. In three hours I was with my brothers, James and "Dock," and sent them posthaste to Oregon City for men, food, and horses. I remained to rest and recuperate my half-famished condition. The next morning we were ready to retrace our steps and carry the much needed succor. To our surprise we met the emigrants that evening. They had moved steadily on, knowing that the distance was short and that food, raiment, and rest were near at hand. We followed the blazed road and it led us to a safe crossing over the treacherous Sandy. The next day, December 23, 1845, the whole party arrived at Foster's haven. Food was set before us in abundance, but we out heralded Tantalus himself and ate sparingly. The roads were still pretty good, and we felt that there should be no rest for the weary till Oregon City was reached. We accordingly pushed on with most of our party, and arrived at our final destination, Oregon City, December 25, 1845, just eight months and twenty-four days from Fulton County, Illinois.

The first winter in Oregon was spent without incident of note. Many of our company bought land or took up donation claims and went to work with a purpose and earnestness worthy of true pioneers.

Samuel K. Barlow for many years after made annual
trips into the mountain wilds. Finally old age compelled
him to enjoy these trips in reminiscences only, and many
are the recitals he gave with accurate memory of events
indelibly stamped to his children and children's children.

In the summer of 1846, after the Provisional govern-
ment had been established, S. K. Barlow made applica-
tion for a charter to make a wagon road over the Cascade
Mountains south of Mount Hood. Permission was readily
granted. About forty road workers started out under the
personal supervision of Mr. Barlow. They improved the
condition generally, cutting down grades here and there,
building bridges, making corduroy, and widening the
road everywhere. Two thirds of the immigration of
1846 came over this road and fully if not more than that
proportion availed themselves of this continuous route
in subsequent years. Thus the hazards and expense of
the Columbia River route were obviated. A few miles
extra on the long journey were less trouble than to make
a transfer of goods to the bateaux at The Dalles.

The road was about eighty miles long; sixty-five miles
of it were cut through the primeval forests, canyons,
creeks, and rivers of the Cascade mountains and slopes.
It began at the western side of Tygh Valley and followed
the Indian path for about fifteen miles. In Mr. Barlow's
first reconnoitering tour his observations led him to deter-
mine to blaze out the road over the natural passes he then
and there discovered. Subsequently Mr. Rector approved
of the route and together they confirmed its possibility,
which was afterwards fully determined to be the natural
and most practicable route by immigrations from 1845 to
the present day. The late Judge Matthew P. Deady said
of this road: "The construction of the Barlow road con-
tributed more towards the prosperity of the Willamette
Valley and the future State of Oregon than any other
achievement prior to the building of the railways in 1870."

In 1848 the road was made a toll road by a charter from the Provisional government. A toll of $5.00 for each wagon and $1.00 for a single head of stock was charged to balance accounts. Many were unable to pay the toll, but readily gave their promises to settle in the future. Mr. Barlow, after two seasons, thinking he had reimbursed himself for his outlay, turned the road over to the territory and it became a free highway for the future immigrants to the Willamette Valley. Little or no repairs were made to it after it became public property and it soon relapsed into an almost impassable condition. Immigrants lost many times the toll in the loss of their stock, besides having delays, hardships, and numerous annoyances. After several years, Mr. Barlow found that the promises of many who desired to pay toll had been forgotten. Thus the scheme was not a profitable one, but one which always gave satisfaction to the pioneer spirit of its builder.

Messrs. Foster and Young afterwards rechartered the road and kept it in fairly good repair by the income in toll. Later, Hon. F. O. McCown of Oregon City, organized a stock company for its improvement. Many of the difficult passes are avoided in the new route, but practically the same general direction is followed as that blazed by the pioneer road builders of 1845.

Samuel K. Barlow was born in Nicholas County, Kentucky, January 24, 1795. He was thoroughly pioneer in every respect; in religion, an investigator; in politics, an independent whig; in character, moral and honest; in customs, unconventional; in all things, himself.

In 1848 Mr. Barlow paid $3,000 for the entire donation claim of Thomas McKay. After "proving up" on it by a four years' residence he sold it to William Barlow, its
present owner. The last few years of S. K. Barlow's life were spent in Canemah, near Oregon City, where he died July 14, 1867. He was buried by the side of his wife at Barlow's Prairie, where a monument marks the final resting place of the builder of the first road over the Cascade Mountains.

MARY S. BARLOW.