Westward Wagons: The Rough Start

In our first two episodes we've learned about the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party of 1844 and their amazing journey from Missouri to Alta California. After traveling nearly 2,000 miles they struggled over the Sierra Nevada, becoming the first immigrants bring wagons over the mountains. And then only to be faced with political upheaval and a revolt that left many of their party stranded over the winter in dire conditions.

But history has not spoken much about the first part of their journey. While it may have seemed uneventful, there were many situations and events that made that part of their journey just as difficult and intriguing.

Wagon Train Party Formation

Like most wagon trains, the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party joined other west-bound families. Safety in numbers. At the Nishnabotna River near Council Bluffs, Iowa, they would form a joint party with several wagons bound for Oregon that would later be known as the Higgins Party, and then finally known as the Thorp party. And right from the "get-go" this relationship was destined to be tenuous. The Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party comprised largely of strong-willed Irish Catholics joins forces with a group of Protestants – mostly Quakers and some Baptists. There were differences of opinions on almost every topic and situation.

The first was the "making of laws and regulations" by which the parties would be governed. This was a contentious process and would later lead to a very heated and dangerous encounter.

Following closely was the election of a leader. The Higgins/Thorp party felt there was no need for a leader, Believing the trail was well-enough establish to simply follow on their own. But the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party demanded one – initially nominating Caleb "Old" Greenwood. But he was deemed unacceptable by the Higgins/Thorp party due to his age and likely poor eyesight. Elisha Stephens was then nominated and elected by virtue of the majority votes held by the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party. Being a no-nonsense, hard-driving person, Stephens did not endear himself to the Thorp Party.

Conflicts Arise

The first big conflict came at the Missouri River, which was swollen from Spring Rains. Stephens wanted to cross as soon as possible, but the Higgins/Thorp Party wanted to wait until the river receded. Pushing forward, disaster struck when many of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy cattle refused to cross, or either got stuck in the mud and were left to die. This was an "I told you so" moment for the Higgins/Thorp Party members.

Speaking of rain, in May through June 1844, the rains led to biggest water discharge in recorded history of the Missouri River and Upper Mississippi River. The rains caused at least 17 days of very slow travel or complete stoppage in the first two months of the journey across the plains for

the “northsiders” – those who left from Council Bluffs. But for the “southsiders” who left from Independence, Missouri, it was bad. John Minto of the Gilliam Party recorded only 8 days without rain in the first 60 days of their journey.

The Pace Was Too Much for Some

The fast pace that Stephens demanded, along with the unbearable conditions brought on by the rains – wet clothes, wet bedding, soggy meals and sickness – led to many conflicts. Most notably when A. C. R. Shaw of the Higgins/Thorp Party stormed into camp, fired his gun, reloaded and then threatened to kill Elisha Stephens. This led to another election, in which Stephens was again elected. Surprisingly, some of the Higgins/Thorp Party voted for Stephens, liking their nominee for leader even less. Ultimately, this would end in the parties splitting. Some of the Higgins/Thorp Party members stayed with the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party until Fort Hall. The others would leave, initially electing Harmon Higgins and later John Thorp, for which the party was ultimately named.

In addition to the rain, mud and seemingly endless river crossings and detours caused by the nearly incessant rains, sickness was prevalent among the pioneers. John Murphy and several others would suffer from “prairie fever”, causing delays in travel. And Thomas Vance of the Higgins/Thorp Party would succumb to his illness that lasted several days. Ironically, Jacob Hammer of the Thorp Party, in his diary would attribute his death to “bad medicine” by Dr. John Townsend, a respected licensed physician.

Grasshoppers!

Once the rains did abate, and things began to dry out, and new plague arrived. Grasshoppers of biblical proportions. They were everywhere and in everything. As one diarist wrote, “millions of grasshoppers, some of which jumped into my shoes and were mashed to pieces.” And while the grasshoppers weren’t bad enough, there were mosquitos. Again, millions of mosquitos. Combined with the naturally unsanitary conditions on the trail, dealing with insect plagues had to try patience of even this most hearty of pioneers.

But finally, they reached Fort Laramie and were able to rest and “recruit” their livestock. Maybe even take a bath in a creek. And take a little time to reflect on their journey so far and possibly dream about their future in this new land called Alta California. It was a rough start, but there was even more to come…

The Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party was fortunate in many ways. Prior experience migrating from Ireland to Canada to Missouri. Good planning and organization. Strong leadership. Unity between the families. Strong faith. All these combined created an environment that led to their success – and opened the West!