

Research

Part I. The Johnston Memoirs

William Eddy Johnston was born in the year 1847, at Nauvoo, Illinois. At the age of five, he and his mother journeyed from Illinois to Utah. They settled in Weber canyon above Ogden.¹⁴ Eddy's childhood playmate was a Bannock Indian named Winecas. They spent many hours fishing and swimming. They shared their bounty from hunting excursions with both the white man and Indian. From his Indian friend, Eddy learned many of the Indian customs and ways.¹⁵

While living in North Ogden, Eddy witnessed a rescue. At this time, Eddy was fourteen and his future wife twelve. They remembered seeing the first man and woman who had made their escape from an attacked wagon train. The escapees had made their way to the settlement of Brigham City. Eddy also remembered seeing the Indians returning and displaying the scalps collected from their victims of that same wagon train. (No specific place of residence is mentioned.)

The following is the Indian account which Mr. Eddy Johnston learned from an old Indian. "In the spring of 1861 an emigrant train left the Missouri River bound for

¹⁴Blackfoot Daily Bulletin October 1938.

¹⁵(Ibid.)

California. It was equipped, as nearly as possible, with everything necessary to make safe the trip through an unsettled country infested with Indians. The train consisted of more than sixty wagons and some three hundred souls. Nothing is known of the early part of their trip until they reached the western plains where they were harassed by Indians whom they were able to keep at bay through their well organized camp, their driving management, and their equipment of arms."¹⁶

As the emigrants traveled, they showed their marksmanship by taking pot-shots at Indians. This angered the Indians and runners were sent ahead with the news. Also since the wagon train was so large, it would make quite a handsome raid for the Indians.

As the emigrants progressed along the trail to the fatal site, they were under constant surveillance of the Indians.

The Indians had gathered at Indian Grove.¹⁷

Far up on the mountains seemingly in the heart of the City of Rocks was, and is still, a beautiful forest known as Indian Grove. The altitude appears to be six or seven thousand feet, and slopes to the south and east and is near the top of the range where Raft River Valley can be seen for great distances. To the northeast the view is unobstructed for a long distance and to the southeast the view is another broad view extending a great distance, perhaps thirty or thirty-five miles. In the Indian Grove cold water

¹⁶C.S. Walgamott, Six Decades Back, p. 123.

¹⁷See map # 4.

flows from clear springs, fuel is plentiful and game was then abundant--deer, wild fowl, and antelope within easy reach.

Almo creek flows out of the mountains and City of Rocks below and to the eastward of Indian Grove. On a low table land a mile or so above the old trail was a growth of cedars, still there, where the Indians could and did conceal acres of warriors and their ponies. Along the creek below the trail for a long distance ran a line of willows affording shelter for any number of men and ponies to take positions in the night. Stretching away six to eight miles to the south, an endless plain to the southeast lay a dry, treeless plain with no adjoining shelter closer than fifteen or eighteen miles. All along the base of the mountains to the westward were groups of rocks seemingly foreign to the landscape. Groups of castles, pinnacles, citadels, walls with portholes made be nature, domes standing like umbrellas, grotesque masses with shelves and inverted shelves, crevices and crevasses--the City of Rocks.¹⁶

The Indians that were gathered at the Indian Grove might have consisted of Arapahos, Cheyennes, Utes, Shoshones, Bannocks, Piutes, Cayuse and Owyhees. This gathering of such a large group of different Indian nations is hard to believe. Although there was plenty of water and game at this time, I feel that only the Shoshones, Bannocks, and possibly Piutes were involved. Such a large gathering could not possibly go unnoticed by the emigrants and the army. They were probably Shoshone-Bannocks. Chief Pocatello and his Band were active in the Raft River Valley and the City of Rocks during this time period.

¹⁶Blackfoot Daily Bulletin October 1938

The emigrants traveled the Oregon Trail. They crossed the Raft River and headed south over the Sublette Cutoff to the California road. This road led them to Almo Creek. Here they corralled their wagons and made camp.

The emigrants broke camp the next morning as usual, not knowing that the Indians were watching. As the last wagon pulled out, the prearranged signal was given and the Indians rushed forth. Yelling and screaming as they came out from hiding, it was quite a frightening sight. (According to the survivors.) The emigrants were completely surrounded and cut off from water. Several attempts were made to reach water and each time they were cut off.

The Indians harassed the wagon train night and day. The emigrants ran low on ammunition and water became nonexistent. The Indians worked in relays, never leaving the emigrants alone. This practice helped confuse the emigrants.

The water situation grew critical and an attempt was made to dig several wells. The wells were dug down thirty and ninety feet. This proved fruitless; no water was found. The dirt was thrown underneath the wagons in an attempt to help strengthen their position. Occasional firing from the Indians would strike anything in its path. Many men, women and children were supposedly killed in this manner.

The attack lasted for three days. The stock was turned out of the corral on the third day. The stock rushed for

water and were picked up by the Indians. The Indians during this time period would attack a wagon party and attempt to sell the goods and loot confiscated at a near by settlement in exchange for what they wanted.

The emigrants made a last attempt to escape. They hitched up their wagons and strung out. The Indians swooped in and finished the attack. The wagons were burnt and the bodies mutilated.

The people who escaped the fourth night were the only known survivors.

It was on the fourth night that the guide employed by the train gave up all hopes and planned his escape. He was accompanied by a young woman who had displayed great courage and marksmanship. Under the protection of the darkness they crawled through the sagebrush, making their way to the mountain. After hours and hours of travel they found their way to the settlement at Brigham, Utah. In the after part of the same night one man and two women, one with a nursing baby, secretly stole from the doomed camp, crawling for miles on their hands and knees. The mother of the child, in her anguish and endeavor to keep in company with the others as they crawled through the brush, was compelled to take the garments of the child in her teeth and carry it in that manner.

They were successful in making their escape, reaching a point on Raft River which was afterwards known as EY Ranch, where they lived on rosebuds and roots until found by a rescue party from Brigham, who sent them to the settlement and proceeded to the battle grounds of Almo Creek to find the entire party slain and the wagons burned. The bodies of the unfortunate people were buried in the wells which they had dug.¹

¹C.S. Walgamott, Six Decades Back, p. 126.

Questions Concerning the Story

Many people have questioned the possibility of the Almo Massacre. What was such a large wagon train doing traveling unescorted by the military? What was the name of the company? Why were there no records? These questions and many others have been left unanswered. There are even discrepancies in two written reports of the same story.

The homelands of the Northwestern Shoshoni²⁰ were concentrated along the river flowing into the eastern and northern sides of Great Salt Lake and on the Raft River and Grouse Creek northwest of the lake. Locating the various subsistence areas and villages of these bands as their camps existed at the time of white settler invasion in the 1850s requires, first of all, recognition that these small congregations of people moved about each year as food supplies dwindled or increased in the different areas. But the bands tended to place their winter camps in the same sheltered spots if sufficient subsistence were available.²¹

This shows that the Indians inhabiting the area of the massacre to be Shoshoni-Bannock. I think that there was only the one nation and not all those listed by Johnston in his account.

In Walgamotts' account of Johnston, he cited Johnston and his wife as being eyewitnesses of the survivors. The survivors totaled up to five; two arrived at Brigham City and three made it only to Raft River (EY Ranch). Johnston

²⁰See Map # 5.

²¹Brigham D. Madsen, Chief Pocatello: The "White Plume", pp. 14-15.

was quoted as having seen the Indians display the scalps at the settlement, but no settlement name is given. The Indian account was told to Johnston by an old Indian.

The Blackfoot Daily Bulletin also used Johnston as a source. But in their version there was no mention of survivors, but it was thought that one must have escaped because a rescue party was sent. It was in this account that the large number of Indians and different tribes present was discussed. The wagon train was to have detoured at American Falls and chosen the wrong valley leading to the California-Nevada route. The Indian account was arrived from a friend of Johnston's, Winecas a Shoshone-Bannock Indian. Winecas and Johnston were supposedly playmates in their younger years. They met and discussed this version at the site several years after the massacre took place. The Almo Massacre was cited as a cause for the Bear River Battle in this article but no proof of this has been found. Johnston was ninety-one years old at the time of giving this account.

There is no solid information available at this time to justify or discredit the Almo Massacre. The only version readily at hand is Johnston's story, and in his two cited reports there are too many discrepancies.

Part II. Documented and Verified Reports

John Hagerty, 1860 Deseret News Weekly.

After the communication of Hon. J. C. Wright, published in this number, was in type, Mr. John Hagerty, one of the emigrants who was in the company attacked and despoiled by the Indians, near City Rocks, to which occurrence the communication refers, called at our office and gave a full detail of the assault and robbery, from which it appears; that on the arrival of the company at Col. Howe's encampment, on the Protneuf, near old Fort Hall, on or about the 1st of September, the Colonel detailed an escort of ten or twelve men, under Sergeant Barry, to accompany them on their way a few days. After proceeding some sixty or seventy miles seeing no signs of Indians, the escort returned back on the morning of the 6th, leaving the company to pursue their journey unprotected. Without molestation they proceeded to within five miles of City Rocks, near the junction with the Salt Lake road, where they encamped on the evening of the 7th, by a small stream known as Rapid creek.

At about eleven o'clock at night an attack was made on them by a small party of Indians who, on finding the emigrants ready to give them a warm reception, drew off, after firing eight or ten guns and came up again on the other side of their camp, where, by taking advantage of the light of the moon which had just risen, they could fire upon the company with greater accuracy, and, at the same time, be hid from the view of the emigrants and measurable secure from their fire.

After continuing the assault about one hour and a half, (during which time they fired some fifty or sixty shots and an indefinite number of arrows, many of which struck the wagons without further injury than perforation them and the contents with holes) they decamped driving off thirty head of cattle, mostly oxen that were used in the teams, which, being tired, had not strayed far from camp.

The emigrants kept up a good watch during the balance of the night, and the next morning picked up twenty-five arrows around their camp, some of which were sticking in the wagons, which had also been pierced with many balls. No Indians were seen, but a sharp lookout was kept up during that day and following night, but at about the same time in the evening that the attack was made the

night before, thirteen of the oxen that had been driven off returned, which convinced the party that the red skins had not gone far away, and that they were lurking about, seeking for a chance to attack them again under more favorable circumstances than at first.

On the forenoon of the 9th, the emigrants concluded to move their camp about two hundred yards to a more favorable position, but before they had detached all their teams from the wagons, after moving them, the Indians commenced another attack more fierce than the first, as they were in greater force, Mr. Hagerty being of the opinion that they were at least one hundred strong.

Seeing no chance of saving their lives only by flight, the whole party, with the exception of Hagerty, managed, by retreating into the bed of the creek among the willows, to elude the savages and to get away unobserved by passing over a mountain and taking the road back towards Fort Hall, leaving Hagerty supposing that he had been killed. He however, after two or three arrows were shot through his clothes, and several balls had whistled near without striking him, also escaped into the willows and hid himself, but was watched so closely by the Indians that he could not get away safely, and remained in his hiding place nearly four days, without food, excepting a few berries which he found by crawling about on his hands and knees, to keep out of sight of the savages, who were watching for him and the rest of the party all the time, evidently supposing that they were yet hid in the brush, and that none of them had made good their escape.

Mr. Hagerty reports that the Indians were at the wagons immediately on their being abandoned by the emigrants, and without waiting to plunder them to any great extent, with much dexterity attached some of the oxen to them and drove off, taking on nearly a mile, the others a less distance, before rifling them of their contents. He is very confident that there were white men among the Indians in disguise. He positively saw one individual with short hair, who had on a pair of fine boots, and a pair of pants, but otherwise dressed and painted like an Indian, and when the attacking party were hitching the oxen to the wagons and driving them off, they spoke to the cattle in good English. He says that he was decidedly uneasy during the time he was compelled to remain in the brush, as the Indians were about him in every direction as thick as bees, and he

did not know what ultimately might be his fate, neither what had become of those who had got away.

As soon as the Indians drew off on the night of the 7th, the emigrants despatched two men, John Brock and Thomas Graham, to inform Col. Howe of their situation and solicit assistance. The messengers proceeded with all possible speed and overtook the escort under Sergeant Barry; before they reached camp, but they were short of rations and could not go to the relief of the emigrants until they could receive a supply.

On hearing of the attack, Col. Howe sent out a company of twenty-five men, under Lieut. Sanders, to the assistance of the party, who, proceeding without delay, arrived at the scene of disaster some time on the afternoon of the 12th, much to the joy of Hagerty, who was in a very perilous condition. The Indians on seeing the troops soon hid themselves and kept out of sight.

At March creek, on his way to the relief of the party, Lieut. Sanders met the refugees, who were in a suffering condition, being without food and not having sufficiency of clothing. Administering to their necessities as far as in his power, under the circumstances, he left part of his command for their protection, and proceeded on with the remainder, but recovered none of the emigrant's property, excepting one yoke of oxen, the balance having been destroyed or taken away.

On the morning of the 13th, the troops returned but, after starting, a party of some five or six, wishing to take an excursion to see if they could not find some of the Indians and gain a little renown by fighting them, had leave to do so, and got into a bigger fight than they wanted with a few of the rascals who were lying in ambush, upon whom they came unexpectedly, and Hagerty reports that there were some splendid feats of horsemanship performed before they overtook or rejoined the balance of the command.

Lieut. Sanders took the entire party back to Col. Howe's camp, and from thence they came in with the troops returning to Camp Floyd and arrived here yesterday.

The names of the persons composing the emigrant company, as given by Mr. Hagerty, were William, John and ---Brock, John Green and a German, name unknown, from DeWitt county, Ill.; Herbert Thomas, wife and three children, his wife's mother--Mrs. Chambers and Thomas Graham, from La Fayette county, Wis.;---Pierce, wife and two children, from Carroll county, Ill.; John

Hagerty, from McGregor's Landing, Clayton county, Iowa, and John Christianson of California, with three wagons and about one hundred and fifty head of cattle and a few horses.

How many more small straggling companies of emigrants, passing over that route late in the season, will be used up before it becomes generally known that they cannot travel safely in that manner, is not known. In this instance, it was fortunate indeed that all the persons escaped unhurt.

RETURN OF THE TROOPS FROM FORT HALL

Yesterday morning, between 9 and 10 o'clock, companies R and H of the second Dragoons, under the command of Lieut. Noris, passed through the city en route for Camp Floyd. They numbered 86 men and 4 officers, with 18 mule wagons. They left Portneuf on the 24th of Sept, and will reach Camp tomorrow. Accompanying them are about 20 men, women and children, of the emigrant company alluded to elsewhere in this issue.²²

John D. Peters 1861.

The massacre at the City of Rocks is one of the cruelest on record. It occurred during the summer of 1861. A party of wealthy Eastern emigrants--forty in number--were traveling en route to California over the old Oregon Trail. In its possession was a large herd of cattle which the company drove--as was the custom in early emigration--in advance of its own progress, the wagon train following the herd at a short distance. Herein lay the cause of the massacre.

Arriving at a point along the Oregon Trail somewhere in the vicinity of the present site of American Falls, the party left the trail in favor of what was known as the Southern cut-off.

When the company arrived at a point along their line of march adjacent with the present site of Almo, Idaho, they set up what, unwittingly, was to be their last camp on the banks of what was then known as Durfee's Creek. This creek has since become better known as Almo Creek.

Almo is situated to the east of a high bluff. Just back of this bluff is a beautiful cove valley

²²The Deseret News, Salt Lake City, Utah, Wednesday, October 3, 1860.

and west of the valley is a high mountain lookout from which the Indians could view vast sweeps of the Idaho country. It is probable that the Indians caught sight of the wagon train several days before it reached the unfortunate camp at Almo, or Durfee's Creek, and had their plans well laid by the time the camp was made.

As the emigrants were camped at Durfee's Creek, the renegade, Chief Pocatello and his band were camped only a half mile away. At nine o'clock in the morning the emigrants broke camp and strung their cattle out ahead of them as was their usual practice. The wagon had barely pulled out of the ill fated camp when the Indians rushed from a small ravine, cutting the emigrants from their cattle and the herders and forcing them back into a corral formation for self defense.

Behind their fortifications in the corral the emigrants defended themselves through three nights of almost constant fighting. They had no water which must have intensified the suffering immensely. A trench was dug in which the women and children sought safety and this was probably a mistake as evidenced by the tales of torture told by three members of the party who made good their escape.

The Indians were numerous and had determined leadership. They stayed with the fight, employing those tactics which would tell most heavily on their opponents with a minimum of loss to themselves.

The three fortunate enough to escape massacre, a man and two women, made their way to Raft River. Following the stream through the narrows they travelled in a south-easterly direction from the head of Raft River valley over the south pass of the Black Pine Valley into Curlew Valley and across the Promontory into the Bear River Valley and eventually found their way to a herd house owned jointly by George Reeder and George Parsons. There they were discovered and brought across the river to the home of Bishop Alvin Nichols where they stayed for some time.

Mr. Peters said that in 1883, he was interested in school matters and paid Mr. Durfee a visit. The latter took him to the scene of the conflict and told him of the scene he and two companions, Mr.

Sheldon Cutler and Mr. Ezra Barnard, encountered when they went to bury the dead.²³

John Comer 1862 Territorial Enterprise.

Of one, in 1862, the Virginia City Territorial Enterprise reported: "When our informant left Humboldt (Nevada) several wagons had just arrived whose sides and covers were transformed into magnified nutmeg-graters by Indian bullets."

By hiding in a willow thicket here for ten days John Comer survived an attack on his wagon train in September, 1862. He was found suffering, in bitter weather, from nine bullet wounds. The newspaper commented that insurance companies need not be afraid to take a risk on him.²⁴

Loveland Rescue 1862.

Late in the fall of 1862, about forty-five immigrants, known as Captain Smith's company, were en route to California. On Raft River they were attacked by Indians who killed four of the party and wounded nine others. All their teams and provisions were stolen and the company was left destitute. By almost superhuman strength and fortitude three of the immigrants made good their escape and called upon Colonel Loveland to rescue the remaining members of the company. The Colonel and three others started for the scene of the trouble and upon their arrival found thirty men, women and children on the verge of starvation. All they had to eat for nine days was wild berries. Although the teams and provisions were lost, the remaining members of the company were rescued and shared the hospitality of Colonel Loveland.²⁵

The same fall (1862), another party, consisting of 12 wagons and 49 emigrants from Iowa, was attacked on Raft River. More than 30 men, women and children were rescued by Colonel

²³Lydia Walker Forsgren, History of Box Elder County 1851-1937. p. 158-159.

²⁴Cort Conley, Idaho for the Curious a Guide, p. 366.

²⁵Kate B. Carter comp. Our Pioneer Heritage, p. 236-237.

Chester Loveland, who came up from Call's Fort in Utah.²⁶

A wagon train of perhaps 10 or a few more wagons, known as the Captain Smith's company, in the spring of 1862 left Missouri bound for California....The emigrant train did camp overnight on Almo Creek, ...was attacked after the last wagon had gone some distance from the creek.²⁷

The same autumn Captain Smith's company, consisting of twelve wagons and some forty-five emigrants from Iowa, was attacked on Raft River. The battle raged for an hour and a half, during which time the emigrants lost four killed and nine wounded. Among the casualties were Captain Smith, wounded in both legs and one arm, and his wife and little daughter, both shot through the body. After running off most of the livestock, the Indians retired. The emigrants were now forced to abandon all but one of their wagons, into which the survivors crowded and proceeded on their way. Before sundown, however, they were again attacked by a band of savages one hundred strong. After a short struggle the Indians seized the remaining team and wagon, leaving the emigrants on foot with no provisions except a sack of flour. Whether the savages voluntarily spared the lives of the emigrants or the latter escaped with the coming of darkness is not known.

Three members of the unfortunate party managed to make their way on foot to Call's Fort, just north of Brigham City, Utah for help. Here they were kindly received by Colonel Chester Loveland, who promptly set out for the scene of the tragedy with three men. The colonel succeeded in rescuing some thirty persons--men, women, and children--who were weak with hunger. The little daughter of Captain Smith, however, died on the way back to the settlements.²⁸

²⁶History of Cassia County and Burley Revised 1952, p. 38.

²⁷South Idaho Press, Burley, Idaho Thursday, September 27, 1973.

²⁸Leslie L. Sudweeks "The Raft River in Idaho History", p.302.

. . . . This gentleman's grandfather was Bishop Alvin Nichols, who besides his church affiliations, was Indian agent in Utah at the time, and the man who first talked to the three individuals who had escaped the attack. The original version of how two men and a woman with a baby in her arms managed to elude the attacking redskins is true. This was corroborated when the three managed to drag themselves almost half alive, to the Nichols home outside Brigham City.

They told of incredible hardships, of how the three when leaving the battle site, crawled stealthily through the underbrush, trying to elude the Indian....the woman at times crawling on her hands and knees holding the baby by its clothes in her teeth is true....the mother herself related the experience, and it was confirmed by her companions, there is a question that the baby survived the ordeal. There is one account that the child died on the way, and was buried on the trail. The records only indicate that two men and a woman somehow traveled without food over 135 miles in rough, dangerous country to safety.

After aiding the survivors, hearing their story and the plight of those left behind, Bishop Nichols, realizing that a rescue attempt must be made, sent for Col. Chester Loveland. This man, who held a commissioned military title, was a colonel in the Latter Day Saints Army, Box Elder County, some distance from the Nichols homestead....Col. Loveland made immediate preparations to leave....decided to take only three other persons...²⁹

Group of Fifteen Men 1862.

In September, 1862, a party of 15 men from California and Nevada, on their way east, were attacked by Indians not far from the Silent City of Rocks, where they had camped the previous night. There were nine survivors.³⁰

Interview With William Bruesch 9-06-1987. According to

Bill Bruesch, the Almo Massacre was not what the legends

²⁹South Idaho Press Burley, Idaho Friday, September 28, 1973.

³⁰History of Cassia County and Burley Revised 1952, p. 78.

say. Bill maintained that 300 people disappearing would have caused quite a stir. Bill's research indicated that most wagon trains consisted of 10 to 12 wagons for a big train. Anything bigger would have made feed and water scarce for the stock. Bill said that there was a wagon train attacked on Almo Creek. Bill's grandmother, Jane Isabel Barker Durfee, told him this account in 1920.

A wagon train consisting of about 5 wagons and 5 people were attacked north of Arley Cahoon's house. Bill remembers a school field trip to look at the breast works before Uncle Pete plowed them up to plant alfalfa. Jane Barker Durfee was living on a ranch near Brigham City during the 1860s. A man and women came to the settlements. They had lost their outfits. They had camped on Almo Creek and about a quarter mile or so out they were jumped by Indians. When the ammunition ran out and etc., a man and woman crawled back to Almo Creek and then followed it down to the narrows of the Raft River. They then went to Cedar Brakes Ranch over on Cedar Creek, (Curlew Valley) and on down to Brigham City. The party consisted of five people, four men and one woman.³¹

Interview with Jesse Lloyd 9-20-1987. Vic Spencer previous owner of the present Harold Ward place told of burned wagons on the way to Circle Creek. The burned wagons

³¹Personal interview with William Bruesch 9-06-1987.

were in the top of Levi Lloyd's field north of Tracy's alfalfa field. Old man Hoff (blacksmith) took some hub benders off the burned wagons.³²

Jesse went with the Cahoon kids and poked around the breastworks. Jesse plowed the breastwork field, but didn't find anything except for a strange rock. Jesse bought some iron rails from an old pack rat in Brigham City who claimed to have some original iron from the massacre. Rex Edward told Jesse that Rex's grandfather knew of the grave over on Cedar Creek where the baby mentioned in the massacre account was buried. Rex also knew where the grave was located. Rex and his grandfather cared for the grave. Rex died before showing the grave site to Jesse.³³

Interview with James and Dorothy Sheridan 5-29-89.

Jim's grandfather was Eddy Johnston. Jim believes that the Almo massacre did take place but not to the great extent of that reported by his grandfather. The actions were the same, but the numbers different. The account that Jim has record of is the same as that in Six Decades Back.³⁴

³²See map #4.

³³ Personal interview with Jesse Lloyd 9-20-1987.

³⁴Personal interview with James and Dorothy Sheridan 5-29-89.