

New Lives in New Lands

The women who walked the Oregon Trail and settled into a new home in a new land had another task that befell them: to become their own doctors and nurses. Alice Revenue Webster, an early settler on the banks of the Sandy River in Oregon recounts:

“My mother was always nursing the sick children and helping women at childbirth. I remember how men would come for her at all hours of the day and night, and she would ride off on horseback. After some hours mother would be back to tell us about the new baby at somebody’s cabin.”

There were countless babies born along the trail. It was quite dangerous to both mother and child, as up to 14 percent of women died from complications of childbirth. One woman who had an unusual encounter with an infant during her overland journey was Margaret Windsor Iman. At the age of seventeen, Margaret ran away from her ‘all-but-kind’ stepmother in Dekalb County, Missouri, joining her neighbors on their 1852 wagon train to Oregon Territory. This journey precipitated a long life of nurturing children, those of her own as well as others from another mother. She tells of her six month trip along the trail:

“I carried a little motherless babe five hundred miles, whose mother had died, and when we would camp I would go from camp to camp in search of some good, kind, motherly women to let it nurse, and no one ever refused when I presented it to them.”

Unfortunately, Margaret lost track of that infant upon arrival in The Dalles, where her party continued north to Skamania County, Washington.

“At the latter end of the trip I had come down with what was then called ‘mountain fever,’ I became unconscious and did not know anything.”

Margaret became a patient at a hospital erected at the head of the Cascade Rapids, and was soon on her way to recovery.

“But while I was sick in bed I heard the cries of an infant babe in some part of the building. I asked for it to be brought to me and my bidding was granted. I took it in my arms and tried to play with it, but was so weak and worn I could not. This was the first babe I had in my arms after landing at the Cascades in 1853.”

Within the year, Margaret Windsor became acquainted with her future husband, a Mr. Felix Iman. The couple soon married, and Margaret began her own family, bearing sixteen children in all. By the time she recounted this story at the end of her years, she had been mother, grandmother or great-grandmother to 89 children in all.

Source: *With Her Own Wings: Historical Sketches, Reminiscences, and Anecdotes of Oregon's Pioneer Women*, by Helen Krebs Smith. Wildside Press, 2008.