

## Sabbatical Report from Spring and Fall 2016

Steve McQuiddy  
Lane Community College

### Abstract

My sabbatical time was used to research and write a book on what are sometimes called “hidden histories” of Oregon and the Pacific Northwest. The working title is *Where Some Go Crazy: True Stories of Dreamers, Geniuses, and Eccentrics at the End of the Oregon Trail*. Research took place at the University of Oregon Special Collections and the Lane County Historical Museum in Eugene, the Oregon Historical Society Research Library and the Lewis and Clark College Special Collections in Portland, the Oregon State Library in Salem, the University of California Bancroft Library in Berkeley, and local history centers and museums in smaller communities around Oregon. The manuscript was largely completed during my second term of sabbatical. It is being finalized and will be considered for publication by Oregon State University Press, who published my first book in 2013.

### Introduction / Overview

*Where Some Go Crazy* is a narrative collection of true stories about what can happen to perfectly normal individuals when they have no place left to go. It tells of people (and in one case an elephant) who have given the Pacific Northwest its reputation for innovative and sometimes outlandish ideas and behavior.

It’s about life in the Wild West, the world at the end of the trail, the Pacific Northwest as the last refuge for those who can’t fit in anywhere else. It’s an observation on human nature, on what happens when dreams and reality collide. It’s a documentary *and* an entertainment. It’s Lewis and Clark meets *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*.

Mainly, it’s about people and what drives them to do the things they do. Through a loosely connected narrative of fully researched stories, we learn about the yearning to “go west, young man” (and woman) and just what in the world you might do when you get there. We learn about big dreams and failed experiments, carefully planned cons gone wrong, and utterly impossible leaps of faith. We learn about bandits and bears, flying machines and bicycle riders, a dead whale that stunk up a town, a mountain some believed was full of oil, a little girl from a logging camp who convinced people she was a French princess, Oregon’s quiet connection to the Lost Generation of 1920s Paris, and a full excursion into the city of Eugene and how it got that way.

The stories are factual (and documented) while leaving room for interpretation. They aim to mirror the daily tensions that we all face, as we choose between the way things are, and the way we’d like them to be.

## Activities and Developments

As with earlier history writing, I began by installing myself in the special collections departments at university libraries. The staff at the University of Oregon (UO), the Lane County Historical Museum (LCHM), and Lewis and Clark College came to know me well during research for my last book, so my work in those institutions went very smoothly. Work at the Bancroft Library at the University of California in Berkeley turned out to be minimal, as the files I reviewed were not particularly enlightening. The Oregon Historical Society in Portland offered some excellent primary source documents and supplemental materials for files more heavily researched at the UO and LCHM. In most of the institutions, I was allowed to photograph papers for later perusal on my computer. I took perhaps one thousand shots, which required later resizing, labeling, and categorizing at my home office desk—a grinding process that usually helps you assess just how badly you want to tell someone’s story.

As I had hoped and expected, the old-school wooden card catalogues at the Oregon State Library in Salem were a gold mine of information. (It is a little-discussed fact that not everything is available on the internet.) For those with patience and persistence to sort through these decades-worth of typed cards and sometimes handwritten notes inserted by librarians now long departed, the rewards can be considerable. And some of the leads I found were significant.

One development was unexpected, although not particularly surprising. My original table of contents outlined a plan for fifteen relatively short pieces, grouped into clear categories. But before I even began writing, a new story reared up and would not go away. I’d stumbled onto mention of an evangelical preacher who lived in the mid-Willamette Valley in the days of the Oregon Territory and early statehood. I quickly realized that I had to include some mention of perhaps the most powerful colonial force in the history of America: the early missionaries and the settlers they served. After burying myself in thousands of pages of church histories and religious diaries, I distilled the history of Oregon’s missionary settlements into a few thousand words—certainly one of my most challenging editorial endeavors.

This story somewhat changed the framework I originally had in mind, and the final manuscript came in at twelve total stories, with some of them considerably longer than expected, and some about the length I had envisioned. While it was hard to set aside a couple of my intended subjects, the final product holds together better in its current form.

On the larger scale as I researched and wrote these stories, I was reminded again and again that there is always something to learn from others, always some perspective we haven’t considered, always some experience that broadens and deepens our own understanding.

As a writing instructor, this is an integral part of my fundamental teaching philosophy, and I employ all manner of activities, discussions, and assignments that encourage my students to go outside their comfort zone, to see the world from angles they hadn’t considered before. I often bring up anecdotes and examples from people on the margins, those who have had to find their own way in a world not always receptive to who or what they are. My students often find connections I hadn’t considered, bringing their own experience to bear, and turning a critical thinking exercise into a dialogue for all of us.

I'm looking forward to bringing elements of this book into my classroom and seeing where they might go. Who knows what we might learn from the dreamers, geniuses, and eccentrics in Oregon history—the misfits who had to strike out for the territories in order to find their home. It may very well turn out completely different than the lesson I bring in. But then, that's half the fun.

### Manuscript Excerpt

Following is an excerpt from a chapter in *Where Some Go Crazy*. It lays the groundwork for the story of Joab Powell, an illiterate yet colorful Baptist preacher who settled in the Willamette Valley in the 1850s and traveled the region as a “circuit rider,” taking his peculiar brand of homespun evangelism directly to the people for more than thirty years.

#### They Know Not What They Do

Before the Oregon Trail, before the covered wagons, before the legends and mythology, the dust and dysentery, the campfires and cholera, there was God. For those who believed, God had always been there and always would be, so it made sense when they heard that one fall day in 1831, four members from the great western Indian tribes walked into the frontier settlement of St. Louis at the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers and asked to see the white man's “Book of Heaven.”

They were taken to General William Clark (of Lewis and Clark fame, now the Superintendent of Indian Affairs) and spent the winter in St. Louis, interacting with the whites, learning their ways, and contracting their diseases—of which three of them apparently died. Whether or not these ambassadors truly were interested in religion, or merely curious about the newcomers encroaching on their world, or came for entirely different reasons, was quickly made irrelevant. Word spread through letters and well-circulated publications, and the story grew to apocryphal proportions. These noble “red men” had been sent by their chiefs in the Pacific Northwest, the story went. They had traveled thousands of miles across desert and mountains, through heat and cold and hunger, fighting off assailants in unfriendly lands, finally reaching the goal of their pilgrimage and intent on carrying back the glad tidings to their waiting brethren.

Back east in the various church headquarters of the young and growing American republic, this was all the whites needed to hear: the Indians wanted their God.

Up until that time, the land west of the Mississippi River had been largely the purview of fur traders, explorers, and the native populations. The people who had lived here for millennia were considered savages by the newcomers; the land was seen as unused and therefore open to exploitation. For better or worse, the whites largely saw themselves as bringing the gifts of civilization to what they viewed as an inferior or at least undeveloped world. And it helped that the Bible said “Go ye unto all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.”

So they did. Councils were convened in the churches, and groups were formed to go west, build missions, and teach the word of God. It took a certain fortitude of both body and spirit, but America had been largely built on such people: the Puritans on the Mayflower, who landed on a rock, named it Plymouth, and founded Massachusetts; the Baptist contrarian Roger Williams, who walked into the wilderness and set up his own colony in what would become Rhode Island; the Quakers of Pennsylvania; the Catholics in Maryland; the Protestants of the Carolinas. With each push into the seemingly virgin frontier, the increasing European population brought their social, cultural, and spiritual values defined by the Judeo-Christian tradition. Often as not, the missionaries were there from the beginning—and sometimes before any others.

There were generally two kinds. The first were the church-builders, who either led or attended a party of settlers, with their purpose to establish a place of worship and a base for those who followed. Theirs were the names reverently cited fifty and one hundred years later during civic anniversary celebrations in communities at the end of the Oregon Trail. Marcus and Narcissa Whitman in the Walla Walla country of eastern Washington; Fathers Blanchett and Demers, Catholic priests in the lower Columbia region; Jason Lee, founder of the first Methodist mission in the Willamette Valley; and plenty more who made their mark in the eyes of the local descendents.

History is written by the winners, and the libraries are full of books detailing the travails of the missionaries filtered through their perceptions. Originally, they wanted to convert the

natives, based on the “cry for light” from those legendary visitors to St. Louis. But they soon enough realized that they couldn’t force book learning and farming onto adults who had been raised in a culture of oral tradition and nomadic living. So they decided to change that culture by focusing on the next generation, children who were available for re-education. In their view, they were saving the young ones from a life of “filth and neglect,” and, through an ironic sequence of events, that became to some extent true. European diseases, guns, and alcohol—afflictions previously unknown to the natives—killed off many like a great wind sweeping through, and left the survivors with little to maintain their previous way of life.

We’ll never know if it could have been any other way. All we know for certain is that a people lived in this land for a very long time until another people arrived with superior technology and a belief system that justified its uses and excused its consequences.

Once it became clear that the market for saving native souls was finite and quickly shrinking, the missionaries turned their attention to another group that was filling the vacancy and would continue to grow, both in numbers and need: the new settlers spreading westward. As the immigrants’ wagon wheels cut deeper grooves in the Oregon Trail, and the settlements and land claims pushed farther down the Willamette Valley and into the foothills of the snow-peaked Cascades, isolation and its handmaiden loneliness were a very real part of this new frontier life. Visits were rare, mail nearly nonexistent. In some cases, families were so far-flung that they might go an entire season without seeing anyone beyond the farm. Life was hard; the requirements of daily survival took up nearly all their time. Water had to be carried in buckets from a river or spring. Cooking was done over an open flame in a fireplace made of stone and mud. Crops relied on the charity of the weather; meat depended on what game could be found. It helped that the soil was generally good and the game relatively plentiful. This was, after all, the paradise at the end of the trail. But when September skies turned gray and the rains began to fall for the next six months, even the stoutest hearts were tried. And when the roads—really not much more than woodland trails—became quagmires barely passable by horse or human, the sense of isolation was complete.

It took a particular constitution to maintain this kind of life, and, along with their persistence and patience, many settlers no doubt brought with them the moral sensibilities they'd always known. But the people of Oregon tended toward the straight and narrow due to circumstance as much as anything else. As one pioneer put it, "They were all honest, because there was nothing to steal; they were sober, because there was no liquor to drink; there were no misers, because there was no money to hoard; and they were all industrious, because it was work or starve."

This is where the second type of missionary came in—a more mobile breed, taking his message directly to the people. These were the "circuit riders," men who traveled alone on horseback to the nascent towns, villages, and farms that had no church or preacher of their own. He was that peculiar creature perfectly suited to his time and place. The geography was wide, the communities isolated, and the people in need of comfort or at least company. The circuit rider was literally a man on a mission.

He usually traveled alone, making his way over mountain passes and along slick, muddy trails. When he reached a river, he spurred his horse into the water; if rains made it too dangerous to cross, he headed upstream until he found a possible passage. He studied his Bible while riding between stops, and if darkness found him short of his goal, he laid his blanket where he was. When he reached a settler's cabin or the beginnings of a community, he might be called on to pitch a hand mending a fence or butchering a hog. He sat at dinner with the family and ate no better or worse than anyone else. Lodging for the night might be a bed of straw or his blanket laid on a puncheon floor. To many of the settlers, his presence was an essential connection to the type of civilization they'd left behind. In return for room and board, he provided them spiritual comfort, moral counsel, education, and news of the world beyond the farm.

The image of the solitary missionary plodding through the wilderness on his horse, thin and ascetic with burning eyes beneath a wide-brimmed hat, has earned its place in our cultural memory. But not everyone fit this stereotype. Some circuit riders actually had a house and a family that they returned to between trips. Some even had their own churches, which they would

share with other preachers who performed services on a rotating basis.

One such man was Joab Powell. “Uncle Joab,” three hundred pounds of locomotive evangelism, a natural who could inspire hope, fear, laughter, and tears—sometimes all at once. Six feet tall, with powerful hands, a thick neck, and a large head with close-cropped, unkempt hair, he was mass and bulk and strength. The antithesis of the thin and proper preacher, he was a frontier farmer, just like his congregation. And when he stood before them in his rough homespun clothes and mud-spattered boots, took off his long overcoat and laid it on a chair, looked down at the floor and ran his fingers through his hair, then raised his head and stared at the crowd with his piercing blue eyes, as if seeing them all one by one and simultaneously together, and then took a breath before releasing his deep, booming voice, not a soul dared move. Yet he claimed only that he was a simple man with a simple message: “I came to preach to poor sinners.”