

The Lost Blue Bucket Mine

There was certainly never a "mine," and even the memorable "blue bucket" that has given this celebrated story its title may be an invention—but the story of how children found some gold nuggets along the way of the calamitous Meek Cut-off wagon train of 1845 has become a staple part of Oregon's story about itself. Beyond the appeal of neglected gold *somewhere* between the High Desert and Crooked River, the versions of the Blue Bucket tradition catch our fancy with ironic images of treasure found—and disregarded—by small children while the grownups of a lost emigrant train are trying desperately to find their way to the durable treasure of the Willamette Valley. For a very thorough and readable account of the Meek Cut-off and its disasters, see Keith Clark and Lowell Tiller, *The Terrible Trail: The Meek Cutoff, 1845*. The first version given below is full of historical errors (the date of the wagon train, for example), but it typifies how the story lives on through reinvention in oral tradition.

Version 1

In approximately 1850 a wagon train from Missouri was en route to the Pacific Coast of Oregon. When they reached Juntura, Oregon, they had a feud over which route to take. They couldn't come to a compromise and as a result the train was split in three: one following the Columbia River, one going south along the Applegate Trail, and one going through the center of Oregon.

The train going through the center of Oregon ran out of water somewhere between Glass Mountain and Wagon Wheel Mountain, and made camp. Members of the train, even the children, spiraled out in search of water. Two brothers, their sister, and her boyfriend went north of the camp and found many animal bones within a small area. They thought there may have been a water hole that had dried up, and they began digging. The boys dug about ten feet into the earth and found a small spring. While they were digging, the girl sat at the top of the dirt pile playing in the dirt and found small golden nuggets. She thought they were pretty so she stuck them in her pocket. They had carried a small blue bucket with them and left it on a tree above the spring as a marker and went back to the train.

Other members of the train had found a larger spring by the time they had returned, and the children's spring was forgotten.

The train then went northwest to Bear Creek and up to the Astoria area [in fact, to The Dalles], where they reunited with the members of the original train. By this time they had discovered that the nuggets the girl was carrying were gold, but they [the brothers] had also heard of the abundant amount of gold in California and set out to make their fortune.

Several years later the brothers decided to come back to Oregon to find their Blue Bucket Mine. They found the general vicinity but were unable to find the exact area because of landslides. Up until this time there have been many searches for the mine, but none has been successful. (Recorded by Jan Frederick in 1970, teller unnamed, in Randall V. Mills Archive, first published in Suzi Jones, *Oregon Folklore*, pp. 35-36.)

Version 2

[My] mother, Mrs. L.W. Loughary (maiden name, Eliza Simpson) was a member of that ill-fated immigrant train which Stephen Meek led astray in 1845.

. . . She well remembers when the train was lost on the Meek "cut-off," and the irate disfavor under which Meek fell. She distinctly remembers how one of the older girls of the party picked up shining nuggets, carrying them in her apron and upon reaching the wagons, placed them in a blue bucket—a wooden bucket painted blue on the outside. They were not found in a stream, but taken from a mound of earth.

Those nuggets were examined by members of the train who were uncertain as to their quality or value.

The train came to a stream which my mother now thinks was Crooked River. The stream was too deep to ford; the oxen were forced to swim across. A rope crossing was improvised and by this means the belongings of the train were taken across the river.

By some mishap one wagon bed was capsized in the stream and all the contents were lost, including the blue bucket with the nuggets. . . . My mother knows, by experience, that the blue bucket mine is not a legend. . . . (Letter to the Editor, the *Oregonian*, Feb. 27, n.d., by Mrs. J. L. Hushner, in WPA Folklore Project.)

Version 3

In either the year 1846 or 1847 a man by the name of Steve Meek started to pilot a train of emigrants from Snake River to the Willamette Valley. Somewhere on the Malheur they had trouble with Meek and fearing that the emigrants might do him bodily harm he deserted them.

This emigrant train divided into three divisions: one section passed through Silvies Valley in southern Grant County and they turned back toward the Columbia River and crossed at Spanish Gulch, and there is no doubt in my mind that here is where they found the gold.

I learned this from personal acquaintance with some of the people who were with the train. James Officer, grandfather of the Officers now living in Grant County, was in the train. He said that gold was found on the waters of the John Day.

The Durbins and Herins were in that train. They settled near Salem and their descendants are prominent people in Marion County. The emigrants were from Missouri and did not know what gold was. Durbin took some of the nuggets home with him. After gold was discovered in California a man from California happened to stop at the Durbin home. The nuggets were shown to him. He said they were gold. When Mrs. Durbin learned that it was gold she said she could have picked up a blue bucket full of it. Noah Herin, a member of the train, lived near Woodburn in Marion County. He said that when they pulled out of the gulch where the gold was found they could see Mt. Hood.

I am a native of Oregon 67 years of age and had the acquaintance of a great many of the old pioneers. The Blue Bucket story is no myth. (George Irvin of Monument, in the *Blue Mountain Eagle*, April 25, 1919 [WPA Folklore Project].)

Version 4

Both my father, W.J. Herren, and my mother were members of the company that Steve Meek undertook to pilot from the crossing of Snake River to The Dalles in 1845.

Meek had trapped on the upper Deschutes at what was known as the Beaver Meadows two seasons, and claimed that he had been over the route from there to The Dalles and also from there to Boise and that he could take them over a much better route than the one over the Blue Mountains by way of the Grande Ronde Valley. He induced some 30 or 40 families [there were, in fact, 200 wagons] and their outfits to let him guide them over the route that he described, which was by way of the Malheur and Harney lakes and then across the mountains to the Deschutes and down on the west side of it to The Dalles.

But traveling over a mountainous country with a saddle horse proved to be quite different from traveling with heavily loaded wagons and ox-teams. They got along all right until they reached the foot of the mountains, where they found the country so rough and the hills so steep that they could not negotiate them. Meek tried to make it up several tributaries of the south Malheur, but each time had to turn back, which caused them to lose valuable time, and as their provisions were getting quite low they became very much exasperated at Meek and finally served him notice that unless he got them out of there within a certain length of time his life would not be worth very much. He became alarmed and skipped out and left them to their fate.

Several of the young men that had saddle horses scouted the country over and finally found a ridge that led to the summit of the mountain. They concluded that if they could once get their outfits up on this ridge they could make it over the mountains. By hitching ten and sometimes twelve yoke of oxen at one time to a wagon they finally succeeded in getting them up onto the divide.

There was no water on the divide so they had to make a dry camp. The captain of the company told all of the young people who had saddle horses to take buckets and go hunt for water. My father, who was then 23 years old, and his sister, who afterwards became the wife of William Wallace, took their old blue wooden buckets and started out to find water.

They finally found a dry creek bed which they followed until they found a place where a little water was seeping through the gravel, and while my father was digging for water his sister saw something bright and picked it up.

The account given me states that they found two good-sized lumps or nuggets, and that there were many fine particles in the gravel. He was quite sure that it was gold at the time, and when he arrived at camp he showed it to some of the older men, who told him that if it was gold it would be malleable. So one of them took a hammer and hammered both pieces out flat into a saucer-shaped disc.

He had a tool chest with a secret drawer in it. He hid the gold in the chest, therefore no one but the members of my family ever knew what become of it. I well remember the old tool chest and its secret drawer. . . .

My people have always hoped that some member of the family would eventually find the place where the gold was discovered, and many years ago my father gave me an old leather-bound memorandum book, with maps and diagrams showing the water courses and giving a general description of the country My father was among the first to mine on Feather River in California. He kept the gold found in the Blue Mountains and took it to California with him and bought provisions with it at Sacramento in 1849.

I once did some prospecting in the immediate vicinity of where the gold was found. I found some fine gold, but it was late in the fall and the ground froze so that I had to give it up. I intended to go back some time and try it over, but have never done so

The account given me stated that the place where the gold was found was nearly two miles from camp in a northerly direction, and that when they got back to camp they found that others had found water in plenty much nearer than where they obtained theirs, so none of them went back to the place and my father and his sister were undoubtedly the only members of the party that ever saw where it came from. (Letter to the Editor, the *Oregonian*, in March 4, n.d., by W.H. Herren of Heppner, from WPA Folklore Project.)