Ewing Young (1834/1837)

Significance

When Ewing Young arrived from California with his large herd of horses and settled in the Chehalem Valley in 1834, his rancho became the most western of all American farmsteads. When Young successfully led the 1837 Willamette Cattle Company expedition with 630 cattle into the Willamette settlements, it made American settlers more independent of the Hudson's Bay Company and permanently opened the livestock trade from California.

Ewing Young was a master trapper and a great entrepreneur. He was a pioneer in the opening of the Santa Fe Trail, a central figure in the fur trade of the southwest, and opened the trails between New Mexico and California. In Oregon, he was the first American to ranch, farm, and build a mill in the Willamette valley. He raised horses and cattle, grew wheat, operated a sawmill and a gristmill, and his farm became a trading post, general store, and bank for his neighbors. He employed a labor force and supplied housing for them. He even uncovered the bones of prehistoric animals on his ranch, the earliest find in the field of paleontology to be reported from the Pacific Northwest. When he died intestate in 1841, the problem of settling his estate ultimately led to the creation of Oregon's provisional government in 1843.

Historical context

Ewing Young was born in 1799 to a Tennessee farm family. By the early 1820s, he had matured, left home and bought a farm at Charitan, Missouri, on the north bank of the Missouri River. Young's tenure as a farmer was short-lived and by the spring of 1822, he sold his interest to another farmer and set out with a small group bound for Santa Fe and a career in the fur trade.

Young's career as a trapper and trader in the Santa Fe and Taos region was marked by protecting trade goods and pelts, Indian battles and retribution. Pelts were stolen and retrieved often with injuries and fatalities for both Indians and white traders. The trading group traveled from St. Louis to Santa Fe on a number of occasions between 1822 and 1826. In 1826, with a trapper’s license in hand, Young organized a trapping party large enough to withstand attacks and losses. More than a hundred men, guided by Young and four others, moved into the Colorado River Basin to trap beaver. The size of the trapping parties were no deterrent to Indian attacks and after a violent engagement with Indians near the junction of the Gila River and Colorado (near present Yuma, Arizona), Young decided to continue traveling northward along the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon toward Long's Peak and the South Platte River (essentially across the states of Arizona and Colorado to the present-day site of Greeley, Colorado). Historian Harvey Carter speculates that from the South Platte, Young's party may have swung toward the Laramie River, the North Platte, the Sweetwater, and the Little Snake rivers. He continued his travels until summer, 1827, when he returned to Santa Fe. Enroute, Young lost furs and trade goods to corrupt agents and assorted thieves. Shortly after his return, Young and his business partner William Wolfskill opened a trading store in Taos, supplied with goods from St. Louis.

Amidst the trading and trapping, skirmishes continued between various tribes, predominantly Apaches and Comanches, and the traders. Lives and trade goods were lost on both sides. During the late spring of 1830, Young and a large trapping party traveled west from Taos, over the Mogollan Plateau, and west down the south side of the Grand Canyon to the Mojave Desert. After trading with Mojaves for food, the group continued west through Cajon Pass to the mission at San Gabriel before turning toward the San Fernando Valley and over the Tehachapi Range to the San Joaquin River.

Once on the river, the trapping party realized that the area had already, and very recently, been trapped out. Still, they continued north toward the Sacramento Valley, where they met Peter Skene Ogden and a Hudson's Bay Company trapping brigade. In a rare case of cooperation, the HBC group and the American trappers worked the streams from Sacramento to Redding simultaneously -- and without argument.

Young traveled to the San Jose mission, and on to the San Francisco Bay, where he traded pelts with a ship's captain and purchased livestock, mostly horses and mules, for the return trip, effectively creating a trade link between California and St. Louis, by way of Taos. In the fall of 1830, Young's party started back toward Taos. After a brief stop in Los Angeles, the group hurried to the Colorado River, then south to the Gila River, and back toward home. All along the way, Young and his men set traps. They arrived back in Taos with nearly a ton of fine pelts.

In the years that followed, Young formed new partnerships with other business-minded trappers and traders, especially David Jackson, with whom Young began a mule trading business. He also continued trading with California merchants and trapping California rivers. In the spring of 1833, Young traveled as far north as the Umpqua River, following it to its source, then crossing the northwest shore of Klamath Lake before looping south towards Mt. Shasta and the upper reaches of the Sacramento River. By the winter of 1834, Young was back in San Diego.

Among the growing American population Young met there, he found an eccentric promoter of Oregon, Hall Jackson Kelley, who recorded his impressions of Young:

> *Near the port of St. Diego, I met with Capt. Ewing Young and his party of hunters. He was the very man to accompany me; because, like myself, he had an iron constitution, and was inured to hardships. He was almost persuaded.*

Kelley stirred a variety of passions during his visit in California. Everyone had a remark to make about the man. This odd little schoolteacher from Massachusetts caught "Oregon Fever" years before actually seeing the place. He touted Oregon zealously to anyone who would listen.

Young recalled meeting Kelley this way:

> *I was in California, where I met with Mr. Hall J. Kelley on his way to the Columbia River, who represented himself to be the agent of a colonizing company. He wished my company, holding out many inducements.*

Still, Young declined. Young had already been to Oregon and well understood the difficulties that lay ahead for such a venture.

Kelley didn't get much support from other Californians either. Sailing from San Diego to San Pedro, then up the coast to Monterey, Kelley approached every American he could locate, inviting and coaxing any who would listen (then insulting them when he was rejected). He succeeded above all in irritating his audience as well as their employers, who saw Kelley's antics as a direct effort to lure desperately needed employees away. When the employers confronted Kelley about his methods, he accused them of being brutes and villains.

In spite of Kelley's antics, Young apparently reconsidered his decision against exploring more of the Oregon Country and in July, 1834, he approached Kelley agreeing to travel north. The Californians were all too happy to see Kelley go.

The group traveling under Young's guidance bought supplies in San Jose and slowly increased in size as they traveled northward.

> *When we set out from the last settlement, I had seventy-seven horses and mules. Kelley and the other five men had twenty-one, which made ninety-eight animals which I knew were fairly bought. The last nine men that joined the party had fifty-six horses. Whether they bought them, or stole them, I do not know.*

Young's experience in the Sacramento Valley compelled him to move from the San Francisco Bay inland to the Sacramento River, then travel north along the river's east side.

The nine men who joined Young's party late were described by Kelley as "marauders." These were fur trappers and traders who were used to the rough conditions of the trade. Kelley's eccentric nature might have made him an especially savory target for jokes, which, in the days of the fur trade, ran toward a very violent humor. It didn't take long for trouble to start for Kelley.

> *After a few days, those men, finding that I was not disposed to connive at their villainy, sought an opportunity to destroy me. One of them discharged his rifle at me, and very nearly hit the mark; and at a subsequent time the rifle was again levelled at me, but at the moment a word from Young staid the death-charged bullet.*

The violence intimated here was never far from the surface. Americans used to fighting Indians and each other were less sympathetic than suited Kelley's naive perspectives. Although the California tribes were considerably less aggressive than the Southwestern tribes, Young and his companions generally believed that the rules were "Kill or be killed." They acted accordingly.

When the party crossed from Spanish California into the Oregon Country, they met the Rogue Indians, who seemed quite friendly. While traveling along the Rogue River, several members of the Young party came down with malaria. Young stopped to camp on an island, to give the men time to recuperate in a place deemed safe from horse thieves.

When two Rogues swam to the island however, the Americans grew concerned that the swimmers might be spies and that an attack might be imminent. They decided to kill the two and bury their bodies on the island. As soon as they could, the Americans moved from the island and hurried toward the Umpqua.

Not surprisingly, the Rogues' bodies were soon discovered and word traveled quickly north among the Indians that these men had killed in cold blood. The incident would haunt whites in the Rogue Valley for years to come.

Kelley was among those suffering from malaria. When Young's group coincidentally met an HBC brigade hurrying toward Fort Vancouver, the brigade adopted Kelley for the rest of his trip northward. He arrived at Fort Vancouver a feeble, ill, grumpy dreamer, the unsuccessful colonizer of the fabled Oregon Country.

One Hudson's Bay Company employee recalled Kelley's entrance into the home of Chief Factor John McLoughlin:

> *He was penniless and ill-clad, and considered rather too rough for close companionship, and was not invited to the mess. He may have thought this harsh. Our people did not know, or care for, the equality he had perhaps been accustomed to. It should be borne in mind that discipline in those days was rather severe, and a general commingling would not do... Kelley was five feet nine inches high, wore a white slouched hat, blanket capote, leather pants, with a red stripe down the seam, rather outré even for Vancouver.*

Before Young or Kelley reached Fort Vancouver, however, McLoughlin received a letter from Governor Joseph Figueroa of the Santa Clara Mission in California accusing Young of horse-thievery. Whether true or not, the accusations cooled any warmth the normally gregarious McLoughlin held for the Americans.

The Chief Factor did only what was "humanitarian." McLoughlin made sure that medical care was available, but did little else to accommodate Kelley. As one would expect, Kelley, relegated to a cabin outside the fort, complained. Young arrived at Fort Vancouver several days after Kelley. McLoughlin kept them both at arm's reach.

Young's welcome by McLoughlin was heavily influenced by Figueroa's letter. When confronted, Young admitted that the horses might have been stolen, but that he didn't know for sure. Still, McLoughlin cast him as guilty and refused trade. Young was a proud and well-accomplished businessman, one who held trust as a vital component to all business and personal dealing. As might be expected, McLoughlin's suspicions and ill-will fostered Young's resentment, which lingered for several years. Except for Wyeth and the Willamette Mission, Young was isolated from outside trade. McLoughlin eventually softened his position, perhaps realizing that the accusations of horse-thieving were unfair. When McLoughlin sent Young gifts as a token of peace, Young sent it all back, "indignantly refus[ing] to receive the goods or refreshments." Although Young and McLoughlin sent letters jointly to Governor Figueroa, Young held his grudge against McLoughlin well into 1837.

Kelley turned and left Oregon as soon as he could the following spring. Young, however, realized that Oregon was indeed a very special place, perfectly suited to developing business and agricultural operations. Young located a 50 square-mile plot in the Chehalem Valley, called it his own and proceeded to build a cabin on the Red Hills, established a ranch, planted 150 acres of wheat, and began fledgling trading operations with American ships that sailed up the Columbia to Fort William on Wappato Island, Nathaniel Wyeth's post. Young's neighbors were retired HBC engagees who had settled farms of their own on French Prairie near Champoeg. A distant, but American, neighbor of Young's was the Reverend Jason Lee, who established a mission at the present-day site of Salem, Oregon.

In 1836, Young met Sol Smith, who traveled to the Oregon Country in 1834 with Wyeth. Young and Smith built a small sawmill, and began plotting to build a distillery -- a direct threat to the tight hold the HBC held on alcohol in the Oregon Country. Although there were no temperance laws in Oregon, there was a temperance society and some in the community were against the sale of alcohol.

In the midst of Young's efforts to build a distillery, he had the opportunity and fortune to meet Lieutenant William A. Slacum, sent by President Andrew Jackson to look into affairs in the Oregon Country. Apparently, Slacum's influence, combined with efforts from the Oregon Temperance Society caused Young to abandon his plan to establish a still in the Chehalem Valley.

Slacum also recognized the American settlers dependency on the HBC for cattle. Although the HBC generously loaned cattle to pull plows and wagons, the Company refused to sell the beasts and required that any calves produced be returned to the Company's herd at Fort Vancouver. This rule applied to Americans, HBC employees, and former HBC employees.

Slacum and Young established a new enterprise aimed at breaking this monopoly, the Willamette Cattle Company. The Willamette Cattle Company was a venture welcomed by the emigrants. Many settlers, including Lee, McLoughlin, and several other HBC employees, subscribed money for buying livestock. With capital in hand, the partners decided that Slacum would transport Americans to California by ship; Young would purchase cattle in California and, with the help of the Americans, drive their investment north in the Chehalem Valley.

After weeks of negotiating with Mexican generals in San Solano and San Jose, Young bought 729 head of cattle (mostly heifers) for $3 a head. In July, the Americans turned the herd north toward the Chehalem Valley. It would not be an easy trip.

Young and his company pushed the cattle toward the San Joaquin River. It took them more than three weeks to cross. Philip Edwards, a Missourian who accompanied Young south from the Chehalem Valley, kept a diary:

> *Little sleep, much fatigue! Hardly time to eat, many times! Cattle breaking like so many evil spirits and scattering to the four winds! Men, ill-natured and quarrelsome, growling and cursing! Have however, recovered the greater part of the lost cattle... Another month like the last, God avert! Who can describe it?*

During the river crossing, their only keg of gunpowder was soaked. Young sent Edwards back to the Bay Area for more. Finally, on July 27, 1837, with Edwards back in the fold, the group began moving through the scorching Sacramento Valley.

The company spent time swapping stories, reminiscing, and recounting adventures of previous trips. John Turner, a former guide for the HBC, traveled with Young now. They told their own stories of the first trip north. Young told of the ravages of the malaria epidemic and its devastating impacts on Indian villages, where corpses littered throughout a community, visited only by scavenger birds. John Turner was a survivor of the Kalawatsets' attack on the Jedediah Smith party along the Umpqua in 1828 and a member of the HBC expedition that buried the men killed in the attack. Both had grim stories to tell.

As the party worked their way through the Siskiyous, near present Redding, they struggled to find grass for the cattle. The men were restless, irritable, and hungry. Tired of fighting belligerent cattle and tired of their diet of dried beef, the men argued to butcher a heifer. Young, according to Edwards, suggested that if anyone killed one of the animals, it was at his own peril.

Tensions were relieved in late August when the party found a stream with plenty of wood and some grass nearby. Young consented to the men killing a beef. After eating and resting a bit, the party moved more placidly toward Mount Shasta. By the first week of September, they were in the Shasta Valley.

While on the trail, several men who traveled through the area previously spoke quietly about killing an Indian in the Rogue River country. Edwards listened, but said nothing to Young about this. George Gay and William Bailey had been members of a party attacked in the wake of the Young-Kelley murder of the two Rogue River Indians in 1834. Bailey wore a deep scar across his face as a reminder of the event. Between Turner, Gay, and Bailey, the fur trade rule "kill or be killed" still held true, only now a substantial dose of revenge was added to the mix.

While they were still in the Shasta Valley, Gay shot a friendly Indian standing less than ten feet away. Young was incensed, Edwards was polite in his condemnation ("it was a mean, base, dastardly act"), others among the group considered it avenging the death of Americans.

For the next several days tensions ran higher than normal. Bailey, Gay, and Turner wanted Young to stop so they could engage in a fight, but Young was adamant that they keep going. Indians were all around, and although they shot arrows at several animals near the end of the cattle column (injuring several and killing, among other animals, Young's horse), the Americans pushed on. They traveled from Klamath River over the divide to the Rogue River and followed what is now the I-5 corridor into the Umpqua watershed.

From the Umpqua Valley, Young and his men worked toward the Willamette, then along the western side of the Willamette Valley, skirting the eastern slopes of the Coast Range. Young arrived in the valley with about 630 head, valued at $8.50 each. Of those, 135 were Young's own animals, making him the largest rancher in the Oregon Country.

The cattle buying trip had several impacts. Not only did Young reaffirm his trustworthiness among any who might have doubted, but his profit margins and extraordinary bookkeeping endeared him to the growing population of Americans. Young was far and away the wealthiest American in Oregon, and he came to serve as a banker of sorts to the settlers in the Willamette

Valley.

Young settled easily into life in the Chehalem Valley, trading, ranching and farming. The American population slowly grew, as did his sphere of friends, and by 1840 there were nearly 500 whites in the area.

Though Young developed several successful business ventures in the Oregon Country, his most significant and lasting impact came in the wake of his death. After a particularly bad bout of dyspepsia related to an ulcer, Young died in February 1841. He was just 41. Following his funeral (he is buried under an oak tree near the town of Newberg, Oregon) neighbors realized that his death created certain problems for the Americans: he had died a man of great wealth but left no will. A "probate government" was elected to dispose of his property in an orderly manner, though some years later a legitimate heir did show up in Oregon and claim nearly $5000 from the Young estate. The probate government was an important first step toward establishing an American democracy in Oregon.

Young's large herd of wandering and untended livestock was preyed upon by wolves and mountain lions, creating fears within the French-Canadian and American communities nearby. Meetings were held and strategies were developed to keep the marauding predators at bay. These "Wolf Meetings" evolved into a forum to consider the question of self-determination, and in 1843 the settlers in Oregon organized a Provisional Government over the objections of the Hudson's Bay Company. Six years later, the Oregon Territory was officially annexed by the United States.

Ewing Young's personal history shaped many of the early years of American settlement in the West. From Kansas to California and north and south, Young explored, trapped, traded and fought throughout the American West. His sawmill, the cattle ranch, and the grist mill helped provide a foundation for Oregon's early agricultural industry. In death, when his neighbors were forced to deal with his enormous estate, he inadvertently catalyzed the process that would lead to the end of British control over Oregon.

Source: End of the Oregon Trail Museum (http://www.endoftheoregontrail.org/oregontrails/ewingyoung.html).