

## Tabitha Brown, the ‘Mother of Oregon’

*Pacific University founder fell in love with the West Tualatin Plains*

BY MARY JO MORELLI

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**The path that led west to Oregon country, then a foreign land, was not an easy one in 1846, when Tabitha Brown, a 66-year-old widow, made the journey on the South Road (which was also called the Applegate Trail or the Scott-Applegate Trail).**

**“... Worse than alone, in a savage wilderness, without food, without fire, cold and shivering, wolves fighting and howling all around me. The darkness of night forbade the stars to shine upon me: all was solitary as death...”**

But what she found more than made up for the challenges she faced, as she makes clear in this letter to loved ones back east.



COURTESY OF PACIFIC UNIVERSITY

### **Forest Grove, West Tualatin Plains Washington Co., Oregon Territory, 1854**

“... Now I must give you a short description of the beautiful scenery of this delightful & healthful country. The whole of Oregon is delightful, especially the plains, of which there are so many, but this West Tualatin is the most beautiful of all others.

“The outskirts of the plain are circled around with hills, a few miles distant, covered to their summits with fine bunch grass, fir & oak timber. Near to the edge, the plain is circled clear around with beautiful fir trees, green all the year, standing three hundred feet high. In front of them, in contrast with the green, there are large spreading oaks casting their shade over the farmer’s white houses, as there are many in full view.

“Grass is green here all winter, and cattle get their living without being fed. Snow seldom lies on the ground longer than a few days...”

Tabitha Moffatt was born in Brimfield, Massachusetts on May 1, 1780. She received her education and married a Congregational minister, Clark Brown, in 1799. They had four children, three who lived to adulthood. Widowed in 1819, she moved her young family to Missouri and supported them as a teacher. She traveled with family members to the Oregon Country by wagon train in 1846.

Through her friendship with the Rev. Harvey Clark, Brown went on to care for and teach orphaned children, and others entrusted to her care by parents attempting to establish a livelihood. After establishing an orphanage, she and Clark founded the Tualatin Academy in

Forest Grove in 1849 and Pacific University in 1854. She was present in July of 1850 for the construction of the building we now know as Old College Hall.

Tabitha Brown was named mother of Oregon by the 1987 Oregon Legislature. In making this distinction it is stated that she represents the distinctive pioneer heritage, and the charitable and compassionate nature, of Oregon's people.

Brown did regret the great distance between herself and family members who did not make the trip west. She maintained correspondence with family and friends in the States. In May 1854, Brown wrote to her granddaughter in Missouri.

**“I occasionally have an opportunity of seeing letters sent from Missouri to the friends in Oregon. I pity their blindness — they have no knowledge of any other place in this world and believe that that miserable, sickly, frozen place is paradise. They have no conception or idea of the advantages, growth, and beauty of Oregon.”**

Tabitha Moffat Brown passed away in Salem Oregon on May 4, 1858, three days after her 78th birthday. Although she did not witness Oregon's entry into statehood, she certainly shaped it. Her compassion for children and her perseverance and optimism when faced with adversity are characteristics that still move us, 150 years later.

**Mary Jo Morelli of Forest Grove is an avid Washington County historical researcher who is especially interested in educational history. She is a founding member of Friends of Historic Forest Grove.**

**Note: Due to an editing error, this story originally misstated the year that Brown came west. The News-Times regrets the error.**

For further reading:

“The Brown Family History II” by Judith Young & Celistia Platz, 1992.

Peter Parley: a character in a series of books by Samuel G. Goodrich (1793 - 1860).

“Splendid Audacity,” by Gary Miranda and Rick Read.

**Additional resources:**

“This Far Off Sunset Land,” by Carolyn Buan.

“Pacific Northwest Woman, 1815-1925: Lives, Memories and Writings,” edited by Jean M. Ward and Elaine A Maveety.

“Women's Voices from the Oregon Trail,” by Susan G. Butruille.

“Heart of the Trail: The Stories of Eight Wagon Train Women,” by Mary Barmeyer O'Brien.