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James C. Schaap

Dordt University

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Shadowlands

by James Calvin Schaap

Historians say the man who “discovered” it—*discover* is a bit deceptive—was Robert Stuart, a Scottish-born, Canadian-American explorer who was actually travelling west to east, Oregon to St. Louis. Stuart was, as most white men out here were back then, in the fur trade, an employee of the Pacific Fur Company. He wanted to establish a continent-wide trading network. We’re talking way, way back here, a year or two before the War of 1812, in fact.

Of course, *way, way back* is deceptive too because a cave on the edge of one of the hills here has artifacts dating back hundreds, even thousands of years. Fur man Robert Stuart, bless his soul, didn’t discover Ash Hollow, Nebraska, because for centuries indigenous people had known the contours of its sweet grasslands and been refreshed by its pure water. Stuart wasn’t the first to come along *way, way long ago*; Native people had been around, loving up the place, a millennia before. Stuart just happened to be the first Euro-American, the first white man. White privilege has its own vocabulary.

What Robert Stuart stumbled on 200-plus years ago remains a blessed, verdant valley that must have seemed a paradise to him, as it did to a half-million other Euro-Americans who followed the Oregon trail west a couple of decades after him. After starting from somewhere east of the Missouri and slogging along through American grasslands for two long weeks, the pilgrims of the Trail ran up and into sheer delight at Ash Hollow (there’s an ash grove deep in the valley). Think of it this way: you’ve been trudging along forever in knee-deep prairie grass. Nothing else. Okay, maybe, here or there, a spray of cottonwoods like pencils in a cup, rising from a river.

Dr. James Calvin Schaap is Professor of English Emeritus at Dordt University.
Suddenly, you run up to the Platte River to find this broad valley between breathtaking hills created by incredibly clear water, lots of it—and yes, emerald grasses for the livestock. Ash Hollow seemed the Trail’s Garden of Eden, so blessed with bounty and beauty that hundreds of covered wagons pulled off the trail to rest up and turned the place, thereby, into a vacation spot.

At Ash Hollow, you can look over that same valley and imagine the haze of campfires from literally hundreds of covered wagons put up here. I’d never really thought about an Oregon Trail census. In my imagination, Ward Bond was out here leading a wagon train of maybe twenty wagons, all alone in the monstrous landscape, just like on TV.

That’s wildly short-sighted. As many as 400,000 people took the trails west through the years. You’d be hard pressed to find any who didn’t stop for a rest at Ash Hollow, white America’s very first public campground.

A thousand writers have described the jamboree, but I rather like the galloping candor of this passage from Herbert Quick’s *Vandemark’s Folly*:

> Here we went, oxen, cows, mules, horses; coaches, carriages, blue jeans, corduroys, rags, tatters, silks, satins, caps, tall hats, poverty, riches; speculators, missionaries, land-hunters, merchants; criminals escaping from justice; couples fleeing from the law; families seeking homes, the wrecks of homes seeking secrecy; gold-seekers bearing southwest to the Overland Trail; politicians looking for places in which to win fame and fortune; editors hunting opportunities for founding newspapers; adventurers on their way to everywhere; lawyers with a few books. Abolitionists going to the Border War; innocent-looking outfits carrying fugitive slaves; officers hunting escaped negroes; and most numerous of all, homeseekers “hunting country”—a nation on wheels, an empire in the commotion and pangs of birth (freebooks.com).

The state of Nebraska has more than its share of Oregon Trail wagon tracks still visible through its long plains, but few are as sacred as what you can see and touch at Ash Hollow. Even from the air they’re visible. Right up to the Civil War, wagon trains going west would spread out four or five miles wide; but when the topography demanded a queue, they’d funnel everything into a line. Ash Hollow did that, especially down a hill every one of those covered wagons had to navigate—and did, their emptied schooners held back by ropes, hand over hand. Historians say no one ever died at the place people call Windlass Hill, but the ruts those wagons left behind still sweat and bleed.

Thousands of travelers never made it—Rachel Pattison among them, a young bride, just 18 years old, her young life choked away by cholera. She’s buried here, along the road in Ash Hollow Cemetery.

Just a few weekends ago, I set out to follow the Oregon Trail though Nebraska at least because I told myself I needed to see for myself something truly heroic. For years I’ve been reading everything I could lay my hands on about the Lakota, those proud and pernicious people about whom Lewis and Clark were rightly warned. I’d read enough and heard enough to suffer with them and through them, so I told myself I needed a brace of the other side, the white man’s side, of American history.

That story is writ large at Ash Hollow. Something mythic in proportions is in the air here, in the long plains and sharp valley, something immensely heroic—all those families, thousands of them, moving west through all kinds of danger. Many of them left behind a thousand graves, most of which weren’t as reverently placed as Rachel Pattison’s, some few of which are still visible.

In a cemetery beside the Mormon Trail Center back east in Omaha, a life-sized sculpture seems more than alive. A young husband and his wife are
leaving behind a baby whose life has departed and will therefore never reach Zion. It’s haunting because the palpable grief it offers is so very real.

Death was no stranger to the pilgrims, some of whom—many of whom—had terminal cases of “gold fever.” One in ten of the travelers died, most from cholera, a vicious enemy that could bring on a horrible death in a day. Some travelers were pitched from wagons over uneven ground and died beneath the wheels and weight of the schooners. Very few were killed at the hands of the Dakota, the Cheyenne, or the Arapaho; but tens of thousands never made it to Oregon, Montana, or California.

It took a world of gumption, a soul exploding with dreams of a better life. Traveling the trails west took everything anyone had in them, all the strength and will and spirit. They were pioneers, not people of standing or wealth, people who didn’t have much to give but gumption. If they had been well-heeled, they’d have stayed out east.

It’s easy to stand far up on a hill over Ash Hollow and mythologize, even lionize, those who passed this way behind mules or oxen, getting dinner only from whatever wildlife they could rouse from the wilderness all around.

Look at ‘em—they’re American heroes. There’s no end to the postcards. American history tells few better stories than what the trails still offer, few spots as welcoming as Ash Hollow, where wagon ruts mark the passage of strong men and women and children too. Getting here took everything a family had, even, at times, life itself. It’s a joy, an inspiration to stand up on a hill above Ash Hollow while some old memorized hymn, say “America the Beautiful,” rings through your imagination and into the emerald hills all around.

But this is a place with a dark side, as much a shadowland as any other spot on any other map, including yours or mine. This landscape looks pastoral enough, doesn’t it?
There’s another Ash Hollow story that starts a year before and a day’s travel farther up the river, where a cow, a Mormon Bessie in fact, steps away from a saint’s wagon and into a circle of hungry Lakota, who dispatch and devour her with a meal, the likes of which they hadn’t enjoyed in ages.

That Mormon was furious. When the Lakota offered him a horse to salve the wound, pick of the fleet in fact, that wasn’t enough. Now the method of putting out little cross-cultural fires along the trail was to put the flare-up into the hands of the Indian agent, not the military.

This angry Mormon went to the military, where justice was handed over to a brash young man named Lt. John Grattan, who’d claimed a hunger to duke it out with the infidels and get the whole Indian thing over with but good. Grattan led a company of cavalry into the Brule Sioux village. The headman, Conquering Bear, who was angry, came out to parley, turned back to his people, and was, right then, shot dead.

Grattan and his men lost that one. Badly. And it wasn’t pretty. Not at all.

An entire year later, a day’s ride back east along the Platte, just a few miles north of that gorgeous campground at Ash Hollow, a commander named Harney, a Tennessean, took 600 cavalry with revenge in their souls into a camp of 250 Brule Sioux. The night before, Harney had moved troops around the encampment to surround the Brules, who, once they discovered their predicament, went off wildly, and the shooting—the killing—began. Wasn’t pretty either. Not at all. Same butchery, a year later, but now it was white guys wielding bloody knives—eye-for-an-eye, scalp-for-a-scalp. And worse. Literally.

Of the 250 Brule, 87 were killed, and 70 women and children were captured. It’s the battle by which Harney earned his Indian name, or one of them, “Woman killer.”

Today a sign on the highway tells the story and gives directions to the spot of slaughter. I took the gravel to hunt the place down. If there’s signage out there, I missed it; but by my calculations, the Battle of Ash Hollow took place somewhere around here on Blue Water Creek.

If I had told you none of that, you might think I took this placid shot because the meandering Blue Water Creek seemed such a delight out there on the western plains of Nebraska, in a lonesome valley just off the Oregon Trail.

But if I tell you that right here horrifying atrocities took place, graphic killing that I’d rather not describe, if I’d tell you that right there beneath those trees blood was let in a fashion beyond imagination, and it was accomplished by white men, young men, most of whom had likely grown up in some church, then the pastoral tranquility starts to look a little shaded, doesn’t it? It’s chilling, dark, even in the heat of August. Trust me. I was just there.

Harney and his men couldn’t forget the bloody Grattan Massacre that had happened a year before, just as the Sioux could not and would not forget
the massacre right there at Blue Water Creek in September of 1855. The Battle of Ash Hollow was, in many ways, the beginning of the Great Sioux Wars.

Think of this: as all of this was going down, books were being published out east—*Leaves of Grass*, *Walden*, *Scarlet Letter*, *Moby Dick*, and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, all of them in or around those very years. South of here, Kansas was growing by leaps and bounds but bleeding profusely because jayhawkers were moving in to take on the Border Ruffians in an incendiary war some people believe to be the first volleys of American’s Civil War.

Close by here, at Ash Hollow, hundreds, maybe thousands, of weary, rough-and-tumble men and women and kids were camped in the palm of the most beautiful hills any of them had seen since the Missouri River, an Edenic place for a heroic people on their way west—and just up the road from a massacre.

Wouldn’t it be sweet if the stories we told were all peopled by heroes and only about beauty and love of country? Wouldn’t it be a delight to teach kids history if there were no shadowlands from which to turn away?

There’s talk today of a more “patriotic history” in our schools—more flags, less shame, more bootstraps, fewer bootless cries. But a hundred blessed recitations of the glories of Eden will not create patriotism. Only the truth will do that, and the truth includes a serpent we’d as soon not remember.

Two stories share common grounds at Ash Hollow, hard as that is to stomach. Forgetting either only weakens the other.