

Honeymooning on the Oregon Trail

To much of the world, Nebraska, alas, is fly-over country, even if you're in a mini-van, so booooooring because the landscape is so featureless. . .until you come up on petrified natural monuments like Chimney Rock, a site that pumps the traveler's heart with pioneer hope.

All those old west Nebraska rock formations are something. They're sandstone and hard clay, changing even as we speak. But when you're coming up the Trail, east to west, you get close to Chimney Rock and you can't help feeling you're getting somewhere.

Narcissa Whitman, wife of Marcus, the doctor, must have born witness long ago. The Whitmans are a couple every Washington kid discovered in state history courses long ago. Marcus Whitman may well have been the first white man who aimed his wagon at the west coast, believing he could bring it across the mountains--and then did it!

And his wife. The very idea of a woman in all that frontier was unthinkable. It was wrong, not just thoughtless but abomination.

Dr. Marcus Whitman did, and Narcissa, his wife of one day when they left upstate New York for St. Louis, loved every rough-and-tumble minute of it. Not only did she make it through the Plains, she tore through the mountains to arrive at the Oregon Territory, which belonged back then to the Great Brits. She loved the passage, and told her family so in journals and letters published back east, loved every minute of it.

My health was never better than since I have been on the river. I was weighed last week, and came up to 136 pounds. I think I shall endure the journey well - perhaps better than any of the rest of us.

Consider it a honeymoon--Marcus and Narcissa were newlyweds, after all, a man and a woman toggled together to fulfill a requirement of the missionary agency who sent

them out west--missionaries, after all, *had to be* married. The two of them, well on their way to a single life, wanted to be missionaries and therefore needed a spouse so they got married. And, wonders upon wonders, it worked, even passionately. There were sparks. Even fire. Yup.

I have such a good place to shelter - under my husband's wings. He is so excellent. I love to confide in his judgment, and act under him, for it gives me a chance to improve.

Not only did she make it to Oregon, she insisted--can you imagine?--she insisted on riding horseback whenever she could. Side-saddled, of course--no lady would ride astride (don't even think of it). She even wandered away from the wagon train now and then, because what she was seeing, she seemed to understand, was magnificent American countryside no white woman had ever seen before.

Here's some juiciness—and it's not gossip. No sir and no ma'am. Narcissa Whitman, got pregnant *on the trip*. That's right, got herself "in the family way," which means, well, I don't have to spell it out, but I will anyway: it means she and her husband were sporting out there in the all that wild country. Can you believe it?

I first met Narcissa Whitman's story out near Ash Hollow, Nebraska, on the way up to Chimney Rock and all those welcoming monuments, where a highway sign tells her story--well some of it.

But this morning I don't want to go through the sad-and-sorry part, the heartbreaking stuff. I want to stay here at a place where Narcissa and Marcus and their traveling companions all saw now famous Chimney Rock for the very first time, at the place where they pulled their wagon up a rugged trail she told her readers was just as comfortable as any road back east.

Narcissa Whitman, the first woman to conquer the Oregon Trail.