

Portland State University

From the Selected Works of David Peterson del Mar

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**Review of Ghosts of the Pioneers: A
Family Search for the Independent
Oregon Colony of 1844 by Twain
Braden and Jim Sollers**

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on, for example, the build-up to the eruption, the evacuations, eruption metrics, mudflows, floods, or escape stories will need to look to additional sources.

In the Blast Zone stands as an important piece interpreting the historical, ecological, and human significance of the Mount St. Helens eruption. The diversity of perspectives and writing styles it contains, combined with the clarity and insight lent by a very talented collection of authors, makes it a highly accessible read. It seems essential reading for those interested in Pacific Northwest history, forest ecology, philosophy of nature, and also for volcanophiles everywhere.

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GHOSTS OF THE PIONEERS: A FAMILY SEARCH FOR THE INDEPENDENT OREGON COLONY OF 1844

by Twain Braden

illustrations by Jim Sollers

The Lyons Press, Guilford, Connecticut, 2007.
Illustrations, photographs, maps. 304 pages. \$24.95 cloth.

This is a difficult book to categorize or to characterize. As the title suggests, it aspires to discern the ghosts of three families who traveled the Oregon Trail in 1844. Braden undertakes this expedition on two levels: conventional historical research coupled with an extended road trip along the Oregon Trail with a patient wife and four energetic children. Though Braden presents some useful historical material and observations, his book is more interesting and valuable as a meditation on modern masculinity than as a piece of historical scholarship.

This is not a conventional history. Braden switches back and forth between the families of the wagon train and his own. Moreover, he provides no notes or even a list of sources. It is therefore difficult for readers to discern exactly

what sort of research he conducted or the reliability of his historical reconstructions. Like most enthusiasts of a particular event, he over-emphasizes its uniqueness. "Nothing like this period has existed since for American families," he asserts. "We bucked up against the Pacific and realized that was it. All the land was gone" (p. x). Yet, a great deal of land in the nation's interior remained to be homesteaded long after the Willamette Valley filled. Plenty of families moved west before and after the 1840s.

That said, Braden offers some interesting accounts of the Sager, Shaw, and Morrison families, and he makes excellent use of the observations of John Minto, a prolific and engaging writer who accompanied the Morrisons. Braden often points out how differently men and women experienced the Oregon Trail and provides an interesting account of how the Sager children — who survived the deaths of their parents on the trail and then the killings at the Whitman Mission — "guarded the family story" (p. 279).

But it is Braden's depictions of the contemporary West that ring most true. He admits that his earnest quest for the ghosts of the overlanders is quixotic if not ridiculous. The search for Naomi Sager's gravesite brings the family to "a thirty-mile stretch of trail that no longer exists, long ago tilled under for commercial hell holes, highways, soybean and potato farms, and, more recently, acres of ugly tract housing with faux Olde English names" (p. 231). He is also honest enough to realize that it is a bit of a stretch to equate Missouri's version of pizza or a KOA campground with the discomforts and disease of the Oregon Trail.

Braden's reflections on why he is so drawn to these pioneers are thoughtful and provocative. He admires these "badasses" who could hunt and farm even as they cared for their families; they were practical men who "were profoundly satisfied with their lives" (p. 108). Braden clearly fears becoming a modern middle-class man who works at a Dilbertesque desk job before going home to manipulate the TV remote and

observe the maturation of dull, obese children. He writes movingly of his shortcomings as a husband and his anxieties as a father, even as he hopes that the ghosts of the Oregon Trail will somehow deliver him from his fears.

Approaching the past to escape the modern condition, rather than trying to understand history on its own terms, inevitably leads to at least a little nostalgia and romanticizing, shortcomings that *Ghosts of the Pioneers* is not immune from. But this well written and engaging book often eschews simple answers to the dilemmas of the past and, especially, the present.

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THE FISHERMEN'S FRONTIER: PEOPLE AND SALMON IN SOUTHEAST ALASKA

by David F. Arnold

University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2008.
Illustrations, photographs, charts, maps, notes,
bibliography, index. 296 pages. \$35.00 cloth.

Books about fish tend to be tales of decline. This is especially true of the large literature about Pacific salmon, chronicling the destruction of the resource at the hands of people who have not understood, or have refused to accept, what the fish need to survive. A welcome exception is David F. Arnold's portrait of the small-boat fishery and fishermen of Southeast Alaska. It is a fishery that is ecologically healthy, if not necessarily economically sound, and if that seems to be a paradox, that is because it is a fishing culture as varied and changeable as the fish themselves.

Arnold, a professor of history at Columbia Basin College who has spent time as a small-boat fisherman, has written "a history of a living salmon fishery — and salmon fishermen — from pre-contact to the present" (p.

4). Inspired by historian Richard White, Arnold has explored the deep connections between salmon and humans — an intimacy fostered largely through work — asking the question, is there anything intrinsically valuable in the continued existence of local, small-boat fishing cultures? In answering the question, Arnold has untangled some of the social and environmental relationships between humans and fish along the Alaska Panhandle and discussed how these relationships have shifted and evolved in response to outside forces.

Arnold's is a thoughtful and insightful examination. Take the example of the fish trap: the early Native people used weirs to trap salmon on rivers; the early fishery canneries used traps for the same purpose, until they were outlawed in 1959. But now, biologists are considering bringing fish traps back as a method for sorting hatchery fish from wild fish, using a harvest tool to perpetuate the runs.

The most detailed section of Arnold's book deals with the early aboriginal fishery and the three waves of colonization in Southeast Alaska: maritime fur traders, exploitation by Russia, and exploitation by Americans after 1867. Early settlement emerged where the salmon were most easily exploited. Because the runs have often been as concentrated as they have been variable, Native peoples developed efficient systems for capturing fish. They also developed a system of property rights that acted to limit fishing intensity. The goals were not ecological but social and cultural, since abundant resources guaranteed the prosperity of the clan and prestige of the clan leader.

It was Euro-Americans who, vested in the ideas of property and ownership, created an open access fishery that allowed industrial-scale development and the near-destruction of many runs. The European fur traders and the Russians did not have the manpower or technology to fully exploit the fisheries, but the Americans did. Local salmon fisheries became global as they passed from Indian to