
The travelers arrived at Independence Rock – the great register of the desert – on schedule and in time to observe the Fourth of July. One man dug a string of firecrackers out of his wagon, and the young boys had a fine time setting them off. But this was mere overture to the bombs bursting in air for the country's 86th birthday celebration. As was his custom – and against Jack Brand's decree – Jim Connor lifted the ban on rifle fire for this one night. Gun shots and inebriated, patriotic oratory soon echoed throughout the camp.

Emily escaped the free-for-all by joining a group of women trekking to Independence Rock, the most famous landmark on the trail. On this night the excursion seemed fitting, even after walking all day. More to the point, if she stayed in camp she might be hit by a stray bullet. If the men were so intent on shooting each other, why didn't they go fight in the civil war?

As they walked to the vast monument, Delia mused that it looked like a giant turtle's back. Another woman said it resembled an enormous whale from Melville's *Moby-Dick*. Emily remembered reading the book by the fireside in her father's study. Heavens, how long ago had that been? Not that long, really. It was hard to imagine

she'd ever had time to settle in for a good, long read; harder still to imagine she ever would again.

At the rock, the women hiked up their skirts and scaled the crumbling granite, combing the surface for recognizable names, daubed in axle grease or carved into the rock. Some of the carvings were beautifully rendered and must have taken days to complete.

When they reached the top, Emily settled in to admire the sunset while the others added their names to the rock. She wondered how they could think their marks would last. Inscriptions just a few years old were fading, blasted away by wind-driven sand. A few perused the monument as if it were a newspaper, their eyes bright with hope that someone they knew had gotten this far - anything to give them the will to continue. Emily let them search. Instead, she reveled in the cool evening and the fiery sunset. For the rest of her days, whenever she thought of the American West, she would recall the vivid scene before her: the vast darkening sky with its massing clouds of purple and blazing scarlet, the glowing russet sandstone, and at the horizon a sunset of pure, molten gold.

Before lighting their candles to descend the rock, the women stood with her and watched the fading rays. Ahead was a sobering view of the Wind River Mountains, their snow-capped peaks aflame in the setting sun. The

thought of scaling those mountains stirred in them equal parts anticipation and dread. Perhaps the men were right to celebrate and forget about the road ahead.

They arrived back at camp only to step into the middle of a heated debate over hunting rules and the rate of travel. Emily went directly to the wagon. As she slipped under the covers, she prayed she'd get to sleep before any fighting broke out. The Indians must be laughing at them, the way their men were always at each other. There was nothing the Indians could do to them that they weren't already doing to themselves.
