   

In the early 1800’s both Britain and America computed for the lucrative fur business in the Oregon territory. After the War of 1812, the U.S. and Great Britain both still had strong claims to Oregon, so in 1818, they agreed to a joint occupation of Oregon. As part of the treaty to purchase Florida (Adams-Onis Treaty), Spain gave up its claim above the 42nd parallel of latitude. Russia dropped her claims below the 54’40 line. Today that line marks the Southern border of Alaska.

For about 20 years after 1818, not many Americans went to Oregon. Then in 1824, a young fur trapper named Jedediah Smith found a better route to the west than the rugged path taken by Lewis & Clark. Smith discovered a passage through the Rocky Mountains called South Pass which was low and flat enough for wagons to use. It was to this “pioneer’s paradise”, that was reported by Christian missionaries in Oregon, that Americans started to travel west in large numbers. These reports also coincided with the financial Panic of 1837, which found a lot of Americans out of work and discouraged. Oregon represented a fresh start and before long, wagons were rolling west along the Oregon Trail.

By the early 1840’s, several thousand Americans had made their way to Oregon, but these settlers were not satisfied to have Oregon shared by the U.S. and Britain. Like American settlers in Texas and California, they wanted a government of their own and they wanted to be part of the U.S. It didn’t take long for the governments of the U.S. and Britain to realize that a joint occupation would no longer work. Many Americans insisted that the U.S. should claim all of Oregon, just as they were clamoring for the annexation of Texas and the whole Southwest. James K. Polk was their champion and when he ran for President in 1844 he supported the cause. Such popular slogans as “All of Oregon or none” and “Fifty-four forty or fight” expressed the strong feelings that people had about Oregon. Polk promised that he would not rest until the U.S. had annexed all of the Oregon Country.

After his election, Polk set out to gain Oregon as well as the Southwest, but he didn’t want Oregon enough to risk starting a war with Britain. Instead, he agreed to a compromise treaty that divided Oregon roughly in half at the 49th parallel. That line now marks the western border between the U.S. and Canada. The Senate debate over the Oregon treaty was fierce. Senators from the South and East strongly favored the treaty. They saw no reason to go to war over “worse than useless territory on the coast of the Pacific.” Senators from the West opposed the treaty. They wanted to hold out for all of Oregon. On June 18, 1846, the Senate ratified the treaty 41 to 14. Polk got neither the “fifty-four forty” nor a fight. What he got was even better: a diplomatic settlement that both the U.S. and Britain could accept without spilling a drop of blood.