

GEORGE BUSH, THE VOYAGEUR

The history of the northwest settlement cannot be fully written without an account of George Bush,* who organized and led the first colony of American settlers to the shores of Puget Sound. His great humanity, shrewd intelligence, and knowledge of the natives who then numbered thousands about the headwaters of the Sound had much to do with carrying the first settlers safely through the many crises of famine and war while the feeble colony was slowly gaining enough strength to protect itself.

Mr. Bush claimed to have been born about 1791 in what is now Missouri but was then the French Colony of Louisiana, and in the extreme far west, only reached by the most daring hunters. His early manhood was spent in the employ of the great trading companies who reached out into the Rocky Mountains each season and gathered furs from the Indians and the occasional white trappers.

Bush first began this work with Robideau, the Frenchman, who made his headquarters at St. Louis, but later on enlisted with the Hudson's Bay Company which had been given unrestricted dominion over all Canada outside of the settlements in the East, and, not satisfied with that, sent its trading parties down across the National line where it was safe to do so. It was during this employment with the Hudson's Bay Company that Bush reached the Pacific Coast in the late twenties, and while he did not get as far south as Puget Sound (then occupied by the Company and claimed as a part of the British Dominion), he learned of its favorable climate, soil and fitness for settlement. He then returned to Missouri about 1830, settled in Clay County, married a German-American woman and raised a family of boys.

In 1843, Marcus Whitman made his famous trip from Oregon to the National Capitol and excited the whole country by his stories of the great possible future of the extreme northwest and the duty of the Government to insist upon its claim to dominion over the western Coast from the Mexican settlement in California up to the Russian possessions in the far north.

Everything got into politics then, even more than now, and the Democratic party, which until then had been the most aggressive in extending the National bounds, took up the cry of "Fifty-four Forty, or Fight" to win what they knew would be a close contest for president in 1844. This

*George Bush was one of the first and certainly the greatest man of his race to enter the history of this state. He was a negro.—Editor.

meant the taking possession of the whole thousand miles or more of coast by settlement and driving the English out by threats or force.

As I have indicated before, the people of St. Louis and Missouri had become deeply interested in the extreme west through their trading interests and as the retired voyageur was one of the very few who knew about the western coast, and had sufficient fitness for leadership, he was encouraged by his friends to make up a party and cross the plains to the new Oregon. This was in the winter of 1843-4 and early in the Spring, he, with four other families and three single men, set out with a large outfit of wagons and live stock over what is now known as the "Old Oregon Trail."

The names of this company were as follows: George Bush, his wife and sons (Wm. Owen, Joseph, R. B., Sanford—now living—and Jackson); Col. M. T. Simmons, wife and seven children; David Kindred, wife and one son; Gabriel Jones, wife and three children; Wm. McAllister, wife and several children, and the three young bachelors, Samuel Crockett, Reuben Crowder, and Jesse Ferguson. Of these families, the Jones and Kindreds are now extinct, and of the original party only two sons of Col. Simmons, and Sanford Bush are now living. Lewis Bush, the youngest son of George Bush, was born after their arrival, in 1847 on Bush Prairie, and, by the way, is perhaps the oldest living white American born in the Puget Sound basin. The Bush party had suffered the usual hardships of the overland journey but met no great disaster, and reached The Dalles late in the fall of 1844. There and at Vancouver they camped for the winter and decided their future plans.

At that time the headquarters of the Hudson's Bay Company, the sole official representative of the British Government, was on the Columbia river with its chief settlements at Vancouver and The Dalles. It was the policy of the company to prevent all settlement north of the Columbia river and confine its use to the fur bearing industry and depend upon the Indians for the necessary hunting and trapping. The employes of the company consisted of the necessary factors and clerks, some English but more Scotch, while the rest, boatmen, etc., were nearly all Canadian French.

The great Chief Factor for the whole west was Dr. McLoughlin, a benevolent despot well fitted to govern his savage dominion so long as the Yankees kept away but at the period in question he found himself in a painful conflict between the interests of humanity and the demands of his superiors. The governing board in London was composed of members of the government and aristocracy who were extremely resentful of the demands and claims of the American politicians and gave most imperative orders to Dr. McLoughlin and the other factors and agents on the Coast

to discourage all settlement by the Americans north of the Columbia river and to furnish no supplies or other assistance to the American travelers or settlers. This prohibition also extended, though less rigidly, to the Oregon settlements south of the Columbia, for the company saw clearly that unless the emigration could be checked the vast profits of their fast growing trade in the west would soon be lost.

Sanford Bush, who though a small boy at the time, remembers the trip well, tells me that the main dependence of his father's party and the other early settlers was the friendliness of the French Canadians who had much more sympathy for the poor settlers than with the English stockholders, and did not hesitate to smuggle all sorts of supplies, especially of food, from their farms into the hands of the Americans and it was in this emergency that the former experience and intimate acquaintance of George Bush with the French, and their desire to assist him, turned his attention to the Puget Sound country, and made it possible for him to smuggle his party up into the country which was yet claimed by the British, though with a private understanding between Bush and the Chief Factor. At that time, the road from the Columbia river, or rather from the landing on the Cowlitz river, to the head of the Sound at Tumwater was only a single trail through dense forests, and that was always more or less blocked by falling timber. No vehicle could get through and, while Sanford says that the party did get some of the twenty wagons with which they left Missouri through to The Dalles, they only reached the Sound with what they could pack on their animals or on sleds.

In this condition the little party reached the extreme head of the Sound at Tumwater early in the Spring of 1845 and proceeded to take possession of such tracts of land as took their fancy, covering what is now the town of Tumwater and back along the west side of the little Des Chutes river, and out on the prairie which begins about a mile south of the landing and extends down about three miles to a rise of ground not far from the river. Upon this commanding site, George Bush pitched his last camp and there his family have lived to the present time, and the prairie of some five square miles extent has always been known as Bush Prairie.

Mr. Bush was a farmer and having brought as much live stock as possible he at once broke up some of the best of the open prairie. He was so successful that in a very few years his farm was the main resource for grain, vegetables and fruit for supplying the newcomers in that region. Let me say in passing that his memory is honored to this day among the early families for the fact that while he was at times the only man in the country with food for sale he would never take advantage by raising the price nor allow anyone to buy more than his own needs during an emergency.

In 1845, there were no mills on the Sound for grinding grain nor sawing lumber and as quick as the necessary outfit could be secured, which was about three years later, all of the Bush party, with Mr. Simmons as manager, joined in constructing a combined saw and grist mill at the foot of the lower Tumwater fall, where the small steamers and rafts of timber could reach it at high tide. For the grist mill, the main question was a pair of grinding stones and these were secured from a granite boulder on the shore of Mud Bay, the western branch of Budd's Inlet, at the head of which Tumwater and (two miles north) Olympia are situated. A man named Hamm, a stone cutter by trade, worked out and dressed the stones for use. I have tried to find these but am told that one was allowed to sink into the mud near the old mill site, while the other was taken out to the Bush farm but it cracked to pieces many years ago and is now all gone.

It may be of interest to add that in the late seventies a man by the name of Horton originated the patent wood pipe industry in a mill on the site of the first mill.

In the same year of the first mill, in 1848,* was loaded the first cargo of freight for export from the head of the Sound. This was on the Brig Orbit which had just come from the East around the Horn, and for this also Bush and his party made up a cargo of piles and hand-sawed shingles, etc. The vessel had brought quite a quantity of supplies and these made the first respectable stock of goods for the little store which the party had started in connection with the mill.

The Bush family still possess and use an interesting relic of that first vessel. The Orbit brought out from the East two families named Rider and Moulton, and in their outfit were two fanning mills. So far as known, these were the first ever brought to the Sound and were certainly the first outside of Nisqually, the Hudson's Bay Company station for the Sound. As Bush was the greatest grain raiser and the new grist mill could not well get along without it, Mr. Bush secured one of these fanning mills and for some time all of the settlers who attempted to raise grain were permitted to use it. It is singular that this old hand mill, which was such an important and hard worked factor in the first settlement, should, sixty-five years later, still be as efficient as ever and still be a necessity for the grandchildren of the old pioneer. The other mill was secured by John R. Jackson who was the first settler in Cowlitz Valley and was also a former employe of the Hudson's Bay Company.

As I have said before, George Bush was not only remarkable for his

*The author is here in conflict with other writers. Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Washington, Idaho and Montana*, p. 15, and Lewis & Dryden, *Marine History of the Pacific Northwest*, p. 25 note, both give early January of 1850 as the time of the Orbit's arrival. Both agree that she was the first American vessel to arrive at the head of Puget Sound. These authors mention many names of the pioneers who had part in the transactions connected with the Orbit but they omit the name of Bush.—Editor.

time in the virtues of humanity, sympathy and wise justice, which virtues have been well kept by his descendants, but he had a rare power over the natives, and, while the different tribes often fought out their quarrels in the neighborhood, none of the Bush family or his party were ever molested, so long as they kept west of the Des Chutes river. Sanford Bush tells of one occasion when two tribes, numbering many hundreds, fought all day on the Bush farm but both sides promised not to injure the whites. As, however, the natives had only a few very poor guns and little ammunition, only a few were hurt and the battle consisted mostly of yells and insults.

I asked Sanford and Lewis about Chief Leschi. They say he often came to their place up to the time of the war, and as his mother belonged to the more fierce Yakimas of the trans-mountain tribes, so Leschi, like his brother, Chief Quiemuth, was more of a positive and aggressive character than his clam-digging followers, but was always friendly and respectful to those who treated him fairly.

It was during one of Leschi's visits to their place, about 1850, that one of the ponies was killed by some wild animal. The same thing had happened several times about the country, but none of the Indians nor any of the French trappers had, up to that time, ever seen any animal that was capable of the mischief. Mr. Bush set a large bear trap, that he had brought from Missouri, near the remains of the pony, and was fortunate enough to capture what proved to be a remarkably long bodied and long tailed cougar, the first, so far as the Bush brothers could learn, that had ever been seen on the Sound. In honor of the event, Leschi was allowed to take charge of removing and preparing the skin of the new kind of game.

Asked about the cause of the Indian war, which was started by Leschi on the ground that his people had been deceived and robbed in the outlining of their reservation on the Nisqually, Sanford and Lewis assert positively that all of the whites of the Tumwater and Bush prairie section were agreed that the Indians were badly wronged and there was much sympathy with the Leschi party. When the war opened, Leschi sent word to Bush, promising that none of the whites on the west side of the Des Chutes would be molested and this proved to be true, though all of the natives were in a restless condition over the trouble for many months.

The most critical experience that the Bush company had with the Indians was a few years before in May, 1849, when Pat Kanim, chief of the Snoqualmies, landed at Olympia with a great fleet of war canoes, and made it known that they were going to destroy all of the whites. In this emergency, a squaw went down and told them that Chief Bush had a terrible great gun that would sink all of the canoes as soon as they should come around what is now known as Capitol Point. This alarmed

the natives so much that they finally gave up their purpose and returned down Sound. It is only to be added that the "terrible gun" was a very heavy rifle, carrying an ounce ball, that Bush had brought from the East, and which kicked so badly that nobody dared fire it twice.

Mr. Bush carried on his farm with great success and kept the high respect and good will of all the settlement, until his death in 1867, at the age of 76, his wife having died in September the year before. His eldest son, William Owen, who succeeded his father as the recognized head of the family, was born in 1832 and was twelve years old when he crossed the plains. He had the same gentle virtues of his father and was always consulted in the affairs and politics of Thurston County. During the first state legislature of 1889-90, he was an active and influential member. While he carried on both logging and farming business, he was also greatly interested in the world fairs and at Philadelphia, Chicago and St. Louis took several notable prizes for his remarkable exhibits of Puget Sound productions, all raised on his farm. At the Centennial fair in 1876, he took the world's prize for wheat; and from the Chicago fair he brought back over two hundred kinds of grain which he raised in separate rows in one field.

Wm. Owen died in 1906 and his brother, Sanford, with two sons of Col. Simmons are all that are now left of the first American colony of Puget Sound.

JOHN EDWIN AYER.