

### THE "COLONEL WRIGHT"

The first white people to behold the waterway which drains the great Inland Empire were the members of the Lewis & Clark expedition, who camped at the junction of the rivers at the twin cities' location, October 10, 1805, and their primitive canoes were the first of the white man's boats to descend the Shoshone, or Snake River, and the Oregon, or Columbia, to its mouth.

Previous to 1859 the Columbia from The Dalles upwards had been navigated only by Indian canoes, the Hudson Bay Company's batteaux and, for a short time immediately before this date, by a few flat-bottomed sailing craft freighting to Wallula, which was then old Fort Walla Walla.

Successful steam navigation was established that year by the building of the "Colonel Wright," a stern-wheel boat, at the mouth of the Deschutes River, by Lawrence W. Coe and R. R. Thompson. These men had secured a Government contract for carrying freight for Fort Walla Walla, and this business they had handled with the flat-bottomed batteaux or schooners propelled by sail and wind power.

The pioneer steamboat was named for the distinguished colonel of the Ninth Regiment, United States Infantry, in command at Fort Dalles, who lost his life on the ill-fated "Brother Jonathan."

It was a happy circumstance which perpetuated the name of this gallant officer on a steamer which should be the pioneer to open up traffic on this great system as Colonel Wright, only the September before, had signed a peace talk with the tribes at the Sacred Heart Mission, on the Coeur d'Alene River, which opened this great empire to settlement after being closed for many years by Indian wars. Coe and Thompson probably remembered the commanding officer as the "party of the first part" on their contract.

The "Colonel Wright" was commanded by Captain Len White, an experienced steamboat man. He had spent some months in studying and navigating the river in batteaux for the purpose of learning its dangers before assuming charge of the new venture.

The boat was built with a mast that carried a huge square sail which proved of material advantage during the season of winds that are regular trades up the river. The question of fuel was a grave one and for the first season the boat was supplied with drift wood. It was compelled to carry enough wood for the round trip, comprising in bulk and weight the principal part of the cargo.

The start up the river was made on April 18th, with a dozen

passengers, the owners of the boat and fifty tons of freight to make a trial trip. The day was bright and clear when the boat's head was turned up stream from the Deschutes with a cheer from those on the bank, among whom there was but one dissenter, for a successful trip. That dissenter was Victor Trevitt, who now lies on Memaloose Island under a shaft which attracts more attention from the traveling public than the scenic grandeur of the Columbia River.

Trevitt kept a toll-bridge on the Deschutes at the time, which business would be seriously affected by the success of the boat. He offered to bet five hundred dollars that the boat would never make the trip. No one took up the bet but the next day he showed his foresight by disposing of his bridge property before he knew the result of the trip.

On board the spirit was cheerful, the owners and the captain confident as in the pilot house, in his shirt sleeves, he manipulated the wheel against the strong currents. The passengers were generally acquaintances. History does not name them and all minds were made up for an enjoyable trip.

The first obstacle was the John Day Rapid, a narrow, rocky passage with an island in the center of the river dividing it in two, either side being passable for the sail-boats but for the larger steamer now to be tested. The captain chose the right side, but the channel was too narrow, turns too short, the current too frightful; the boat bumped severely on the rocky bank and he dropped back for a "softer spot;" by taking the left hand channel and with the advantage of the eddies he succeeded in surmounting the short, sharp pitches in the stream until success was celebrated by a prolonged toot of the steam whistle, which would have startled the war-like tribes that formerly opposed the passage of the explorer and fur-trader of early days.

Indian Rapid, Rock Creek Rapid, Squally Hook and other strong points were steamed over as the boat came to them, the speed being fair with a good breeze distending the sail. The captain kept the lead line going constantly, a source of interest to all. Darkness found the trial boat within sound of the famous Umatilla Rapids, the most formidable obstacle on the river, where anchor was dropped for the night, as daylight was necessary for this effort.

The clear sound of the engineer's gong at dawn the next morning found everybody up, all interest centering in Umatilla Rapids, for if this obstruction could be passed, success for the enterprise and for the country was assured. These rapids are formed by three separate reefs, a half mile apart from each other, and will always be a

difficult place in the river, although the Government has expended thousands of dollars in improvements during the past years.

The three reefs were made without injury, the boat trembling and creaking in every part as it breasted the current, the water pouring over the bow and deck in a flood, and she glided into the open river again just as the breakfast bell rang calling to material things after the war of giants, water, steam and a man's mind.

General congratulations took place at the table. The owners were happy and the passengers could now go on by horse-back in a few hours to Walla Walla. But the captain was cautious: "Well, boys," he said, "we are up, but we have to go down." The thought of return was but an intimation of more trouble and new experiences; faith in the boat and her commander had now risen so that all believed they could perform any wonder and scoff at any doubter.

The "Colonel Wright" arrived at Wallula at nine o'clock, sighting the first home of a white man since leaving Deschutes, and Higgins, the solitary inhabitant, came out to take the lines. Here stood the old adobe fort, erected by the Hudson Bay Company years before, and now occupied by the army quartermaster who used the building as a warehouse.

Two hours later the load was discharged, the passengers embarked on the hurricane decks of Cayuse horses furnished by the Indians, the lines were cast off and the boat was headed down stream on the home-stretch.

The speed was astonishing. The Umatilla was run without accident, and, with a full head of steam on, the captain reached John Day at dusk but could still see threatening rocks rising from the boiling water. It was plain sailing to Deschutes, which was reached as the steward was lighting the cabin for supper, having been out on the famous run two days, inaugurating one of the greatest enterprises of the Northwest.

During this year regular trips were made between Deschutes and Wallula and an exploring trip up to Priest's Rapids. Up to 1860 the character of Snake River was wholly unknown. No white man since the fur traders had passed up or down. The Indians, when asked for information, would exclaim, "Oh, *hias skookum chuck*;" "very strong water."

With the new decade gold discoveries on the Clearwater attracted attention and miners were routed from Walla Walla overland to the mouth of that river where it flows into the Snake, and on to the gold bearing district where the towns of Oro Fino and Florence sprang up like magic in these successful diggings. Early in the spring of this

year the army quartermaster employed the "Colonel Wright" to ascend the Snake River as far as the mouth of the Palouse, a point on the direct land route for army supplies by wagon to Fort Colville. The steamer succeeded in making Palouse and a warehouse was maintained there.

In June, 1861, a Mr. Seth Slater, of Portland, wished to transport a load of miner's supplies to the Florence district and agreed with the owners of the "Wright" to make the trip up the Snake River. When the boat left Deschutes (Celilo had not yet been used as a name for the lower end of this route), it was full of freight and passengers bound for the Salmon River diggings, and mining talk, sluices, long toms, rockers, pans, pay-gravel and bed-rock were terms heard from all sides. These people were to be dropped at Wallula, though all desired to share the fortunes of the boat, but the captain would undertake no further responsibility than Slater's contract.

After entering the Snake River the captain touched at an island where an enormous tree had lodged from a former high water, and the crew and volunteer passengers were landed with axes, kept for this purpose, to add to the supply of fuel. Upon disturbing the trunk of the tree a nest of rattlesnakes was also disturbed and a vicious war ensued in which a dozen snakes were killed, two of tremendous size.

At Palouse an enterprising person had strung a rope ferry and passage of the boat was barred by the wire cable which swung barely above the current in the middle of the river, far too low to pass under. The ferryman tried to persuade the captain that it was impossible for his boat to make the river on account of the rapids above, although his opinion may have been biased by the thought that if upper navigation were assured, his ferryboat business would be ruined. Unfortunately, the wheel of the steamer caught the wire and snapped it like a pipe-stem.

Palouse Rapids now confronted the boat, the river being in such immense volume with the June rise that the tide of speculation rose to high water mark among the passengers. Inch by inch, for two hours the gallant "Wright strove for the summit; reached it, and the first difficulty vanished. At the head of the rapid, on the right bank, was Fort Taylor (now called Grange City), a small earth embankment, with a single cabin remaining and a solitary soldier on guard, waving his hat as the boat passed by.

The rapids above, which were heard and feared, were named by Captain White "Texas Rapids," a polite term for a more unhappy place where no water is. A line was put out, the sail set and, a favorable breeze rising in the nick of time, the boat forged ahead faster

than the cable could be hauled in, entangling it in the wheel. Still the boat, propelled by both steam and sail, rushed over the crest, like a thing bewitched. A landing was made and an hour spent in cutting the cable out of the wheel.

No Indians had been seen on the river until now, when an encampment came into view; deer skin lodges beside a stream, canoes, fishnets on the bank, and a herd of horses browsing on the hillside, while Indians slyly peeked at the boat from within or behind their tents, making a picturesque scene. Indians rarely show any curiosity, but not so the horses. As the boat came puffing up the river, the horses, about forty in number, snorting and snuffing, galloped down to the bank and, with heads and tails erect, ranged themselves like a troop of cavalry with one a little in advance as a leader. The boat, when within a short distance, sounded the whistle, and a stampede up the mountain side took place, headed by the leader, until, a safe distance being reached, they stopped for another inspection of the great unknown.

A little further up the river the boat overtook a party of mounted Indians who were engaged in trying to ascertain the speed of the boat by first walking their horses, then trotting, then galloping them. Their experiments amused the passengers for some miles until a rocky bluff shut them off from view. The boat was now in the heart of the Blue Mountains which closed in abruptly to the river.

The evening was deliciously warm, a typical June evening, and the captain dropped anchor, declining to explore a new river by night. The evening was spent in music and song. Charley Frush and his banjo together with his charming tenor voice carried all to other days far away.

At daylight the boat was under way, so no one was long in bed. At eight o'clock a house was seen on the banks of the river on the trail from Walla Walla at Alpowa, where a ferry was located. This was on the great Nez Perce trail, the chief thoroughfare between the upper and lower countries, as these regions were called in those days. There was quite a crowd of people about the house waiting to be ferried over the river, and pack trains were strung along the trail on both sides of the river all in motion *one way*—going to the mines. As the boat came up, the travelers rushed down to the bank waving their hats, cheering, and some firing off guns and pistols, all of which was answered by tooting of the steam whistle and cheering in return.

The captain was for a time undecided which river to ascend, the Snake River, or the Clearwater, but as the packtrains were headed up the Clearwater, the boat was headed into that stream. As the boat

approached the Indian Agency at Lapwai, the Chief, Lawyer, cried out to his people. "Look! Here comes a water wagon." Few Indians had ever seen a steamboat. Here a few minutes were spent; the Indian agent and Lawyer were invited aboard, and then the boat steamed on. After a hard day's work the captain concluded he could go no further with safety, and, with Mr. Slater's consent, the merchandise was landed about twenty five miles above the Agency.

The "Colonel Wright" made two more trips up the Clearwater in the next three weeks and, as the water fell, a new depot had to be located. The tongue of land between the Snake and Clearwater rivers at their junction was selected as a terminus and as a suitable place for a town to grow up as a distributing point for mining and military supplies.

The name Lewiston was bestowed upon the new tent city by Victor Trevitt, who was at the landing one week later where three hundred people were awaiting transportation. In response to a demand for a name at the upper end of the route for the billing of goods, Trevitt said, "Call the place Lewiston for the first white man who set foot on the spot."

The boat's trip down was a rapid one, stiff places and rapids, which took hours to ascend, vanishing on the return. The mounted Indians were again overtaken and once more they tried to speed their horses with the boat; this time with a different result; as in a few minutes they were left out of sight.

As they passed Palouse the captain shouted to the ferryman that he need not put up his cable again, and he never did.

This trip from Deschutes to Slaterville consumed three and a half days, the return down stream being accomplished in eighteen hours.

Coe & Thompson's freight charges from Deschutes to Wallula by batteaux were one hundred and five dollars per ton. With the success of the "Wright" the charges were reduced to eighty dollars per ton and the batteaux had to go out of commission. Wood for fuel cost ten dollars per cord. Captain White's wages were five hundred dollars per month.

As an illustration of the large business done at this time the following figures, taken from the books at The Dalles for tickets for the *up* trip only, will be of interest:

Steamer "Colonel Wright," March 27th....	\$2,625
March 29th....	2,446
March 31st....	1,570

This was in 1862.

Coe & Thompson added other boats to the service and in 1862, when the Oregon Steam Navigation Company was incorporated, a merger was formed, the owners of the upper river boats becoming heavy stockholders in the new company. The achievements of the Oregon Steam Navigation Company from this period until it was finally merged into the Oregon Railway & Navigation Company, form an important part of the history of the Northwest in its development.

LULU DONNELL CRANDALL.

The Dalles, Oregon.