

MONUMENT TO CAPTAIN HEMBEE*

In White county, Tennessee, on the morning of December 22, 1813, it was announced a man child had been born; a few days later there appeared on the legal birth records the name Absalom Jefferson Hembree, son of James and Nancy Hembree. He was a lovely baby boy that looked like his father.

Days rapidly passed into years, the boy soon came to school age, and as a sturdy youth attended the district school in his native state. Growing into young man-hood, he courted the girl of his choice and on the 22nd day of January, 1835, when he was twenty-two years and one month old he was married to Nancy Dodson. During the year 1836 A. J. Hembree and his wife moved into Missouri, where they took up a farm which they worked, improved and cultivated for a number of years. They were energetic people, ambitious and willing to sacrifice comfort for advancement. When word came to them that a number of people were preparing to migrate to the great northwest—Oregon—they planned to join the train. So it was that in the early spring they left their home on the third day of May, 1843, (little Nancy's birthday) and started the great trek across the plains which did not end until they reached Oregon City on the 13th day of November, 1843; six months and ten days on the road. This train of 1843 was a notable company of people—120 wagons, 5,000 head of live stock. Harvey W. Scott, the late editor of the Oregonian said "It numbered about 900 persons, among whom were many strong characters and conspicuous ability as James Nesmith, Jesse Applegate, Mathew Gilmore, M. M. McCarver, who founded Tacoma; John G. Baker, Absalom J. Hembree, Daniel Waldo, William T. Newby, Henry A. G. Lee, John and Daniel Holman, Thomas G. Naylor, John R. Jackson, the first American settler between Columbia River and Puget Sound; Peter H. Burnett, who went to California and became the first governor of that state after it entered the union, and many more."

Many incidents of danger occurred on the trip from Independence, Missouri to Oregon City, Oregon, as was common to all the

*On Sunday June 20, 1920, an interesting ceremony was held in Toppenish, Yakima County, Washington. The Washington State Historical Society had placed a marker on the battlefield where Captain Hembree was killed by the Indians. Through the cooperation of the authorities of Toppenish the Society also placed a monument in the public park of that city. The program consisted of patriotic songs and addresses. O. B. Sperlin, of Tacoma, Vice President of the Washington State Historical Society, was master of ceremonies. Among the speakers was Major John W. Cullen of Portland, Oregon, and his wife, a daughter of Captain Hembree, unveiled the monument. Other speakers included Rev. George Watters, chief of the Yakimas; R. G. Benz, Vice President of the Toppenish Commercial Club; Mr. Sperlin, and D. H. Bonsted, City Attorney of Toppenish. The principal address of the occasion was given by William P. Bonney, Secretary of the Washington State Historical Society, who traced the history leading up to the tragic death of Captain Hembree. The address is here reproduced to make more permanent record of the facts assembled.

immigrant trains that made their way over the "Old Oregon Trail." However this company of 1843 was not seriously interfered with or menaced by the natives along the way, probably because of their great number, and the fact that some 300 of them were bearing arms. To facilitate travel and camp comfort, after having been on the road for some time, the company was divided into squads, with individual leaders. On one occasion when M. M. McCarver and his company was in the lead a red flag was seen in the distance. Supposing it to be Indians with murderous intent, McCarver halted his squad, formed his armed men in battle array, and marched forward. When they reached the red flag they found it to be a large salmon split open, fastened to a pole, to advertise the fact that fish was for sale there. Petty annoyances were practiced on the company by the Indians, for instance, two young men with high ambitions tarried behind one day to carve their names on a rock above that of any other. A party of Indians came along, captured the aspirants for high honors, took them to their company and demanded a ransom for their release, which was paid, much to the chagrin and relief of the captives. Then the Indians used to steal horses during the night, bring them back in the morning and demand pay for their return. Jesse Applegate says that four successive times he paid for the return of one of his horses.

The coming of this large company in 1843 disturbed the equanimity of the Hudson Bay Company. Oregon at that time was under the joint occupancy treaty, with the British trying to keep all American settlers south of the Columbia River. Johnny Grant, the Hudson Bay Company's factor at Fort Hall, tried to dissuade the immigrants from bringing any wagons west of his station. When this company passed Grant sent word to Dr. McLoughlin, the chief factor of the Hudson Bay Company at Vancouver; the evidence of this is contained in a letter written by Dr. McLoughlin to Dr. Tolmie, stationed at Fort Nisqually—the original is in the State Historical Building and reads:

"I this moment received a letter from Mr. Grant informing me there had passed at Fort Hall one thousand men, women and children from the states, bound for the Willamette, but no boundary treaty is yet made. Dr. Whitman is come back and as yet we have received no papers from the states.

Vancouver, Oct. 6, 1843.

JNO. McLOUGHLIN."

Real hardships were experienced by these pioneers after they passed through the Grand Ronde valley. A road way had to be cut through the heavy timber across the Blue Mountains. On top

of those mountains they experienced a snow storm. It was beautiful but uncomfortable. Provisions were running low, but they replenished these to some extent at the Waiilatpu mission. Whitman charged them forty cents a bushel for potatoes. This seemed exorbitant to some of them as potatoes in Missouri sold for twenty cents the bushel. The trip down the Columbia River on rafts of logs, double catamarans, etc., was hazardous and uncomfortable in the extreme; cold fall days, little food, tired out people—it was no child's play, and yet only nine people died on the entire trip and four of them were drowned. That was not a bad death rate when we consider the number of people involved.

Lieutenant John C. Fremont gained his fame as a "pathfinder" by following the 1843 immigrant train across the plains.

A. J. Hembree and family stayed in Oregon City until March, 1844. They then went to Yamhill county, where they took up a land claim at about where the town of Carlton is now located. Here Mr. Hembree constructed a hewed log house, the only one of that character in that vicinity, others were of rough logs. Ten children were born to the family; four are still living.

"Uncle Abb," as A. J. Hembree was known to his neighbors, was popular. In 1846 he was elected to the Oregon legislature, where he served with satisfaction to his constituents. This we assume as a fact because he was re-elected.

When the Indian war of 1855 and '56 began Mr. Hembree assisted in organizing the "Oregon Mounted Volunteers." He was elected captain of Company E.

While this war was general over Oregon and Washington, the center seemed to be the Yakima Valley.

It has been asserted by some that the war was brought on by the treaty making of Governor Stevens, but the following extract from a letter written in April, 1853, by Father Pandosy, the priest stationed at Atahnum to Father Mesplie at The Dalles coupled with other evidence refutes such statements, and shows that the war was being planned before Stevens was near Washington.

A part of the latter referred to reads: "A chief of the upper Nez Perces has killed 30 head of cattle at a feast given to the nation, and this number of animals not being sufficient, seven more were killed; the feast was given in order to make a declaration of war against the whites."

The Territory of Washington at that time was sparsely settled with white people; a few regular soldiers at Forts Steilacoom, Vancouver and Walla Walla, under the command of General Wool,

whose headquarters was in San Francisco. Wool was strangely opposed to having his soldiers do anything to the Indians or to do anything that might be in line of co-operation with Governor Stevens, therefore the protection of life and property devolved mainly on the volunteers. Oregon sent about 400 of her mounted volunteers, commanded by Colonel Cornelius up the Columbia River, through the Walla Walla district, on through the Palouse country, back to the Columbia River, which stream two of the companies, C and E, crossed near the mouth of the Yakima, and proceeded up Satas Creek. Early on the morning of April 10, 1856 the colonel sent a scouting party of ten, under the command of A. J. Hembree, up the mountain side towards the pass. As the scouts neared the top they were ambushed by the Indians. I will use Lieutenant Stillwell's words, one of the scouting party, in describing what happened:

"Just before we got to the top of the hill we went over a little ridge and down a small flat at the head of and between two canyons, one a mere hollow and the other a pretty good sized canyon. The Indians were on the big ridge to the right of us, probably fifty or sixty of them. About forty more of them came around and got between us and the camp to cut us off from our main body of troops. There were a large number, probably one hundred Indians in the large or main canyon ahead. When we got over the flat, Hembree ordered 'Right, charge up the hill.'

"About half the way up the hill the Indians fired on us. We were about fifty yards from the foot of the hill when they fired. None of us were hit. They mostly overshot. After they fired the second time they rose yelling and waving their blankets and stampeded our horses, and the Indians in our rear, between us and camp, closed in at our back and attacked us.

"There were ten of us altogether. This put us between the Indians on the ridge and the bunch of about forty in the rear. About this time Hembree said, 'Retreat, boys, they are too many for us.' Then we retreated along the flat between the two canyons which now seemed to be filled with Indians. In moving, Hembree was on our extreme right near the deeper canyon. There were over one hundred Indians there in the big canyon. I was on the extreme left when we retreated and fell in just ahead of the forty Indians on our left. Four of five of the boys close to me, and just as we got on the level spot between the two canyons, and just at the top of the hill before starting down, Hembree was shot from his mule. He was shot in the right side just above the hip bone, the shot coming

out on the left side at the second rib; the ball going clear through. He called to the boys not to leave him.

"My animal was weak and I was holding it in to keep it from overjumping itself when it came to the steep part going down the hill. An Indian came up to me on this steep hill and kept gaining on me until his horse's nose was against my right knee. I knew that as soon as I struck level ground he'd put his gun against me and shoot, and it would be all off. I threw my horse onto its haunches and swung her around to the left, and as I came around the Indian fell off his horse before he could get his gun up to his face. I looked around and then saw Hembree lying with his head down hill. He was braced up with his right hand and was using his revolver with his left. This was the first time I saw him after he was shot, he having gone over the point of a small sharp ridge out of sight, just before he was shot. Just then an Indian ran up to him and fired, shooting him through the heart. Hembree fell over and moved one foot and then one hand afterwards and then lay still. I could not keep my horse still, but every time she whirled around I fired, having a good pair of Colt's Dragoon revolvers and with them held back the forty mounted Indians until the balance of our party came up."

Mr. Stilwell says that the fight continued all day and that several Indians were killed. Captain Hembree's body was recovered, taken to Oregon and buried on the home farm which is still owned and operated by the Hembree family.

Those Oregon Volunteers went through many hardships, dangers and privations during the winter of 1855 and '56 in their effort to protect American white settlers' lives and property. It has long been the desire of members of the Washington State Historical Society to make some visible recognition of the part they played. Curator L. V. McWhorter, some three years ago got information from an Indian as to the battle ground, and the fact that a white man was killed there; last year through the financial aid of the Toppenish Commercial Club, we were able to have Lieutenant Wm. D. Stillwell of Tilamook, Oregon, come here and go with us in Mr. Newell's auto to the battle ground and point out to us the exact spot where Hembree fell. A marker has been placed on that spot and now we are about to unveil a carved monument, erected to the memory of a grand and good man who died that others might live. This monument stands here in silent repose by the legal permit of your City Council and in its silence tells to the world the human fate of Captain Absalom Jefferson Hembree.

W. P. BONNEY.