

SPANIARDS IN EARLY OREGON

There is well authenticated evidence that a Spanish vessel was wrecked a few miles south of the entrance to the Columbia River, probably about 1725-1730. There were only four survivors, heavily bearded men, who were parching Indian corn over a fire on the beach when they were discovered by an Indian woman who had never before seen men with beards and was astonished at the popping of the corn. She fled in terror to her village crying out that there were men who were also bears, referring to their heavy beards. The Clatsop Indians immediately captured the four Spaniards, among whom was one whose name they pronounced Konapee, possibly a name like Juan de?. He was an armorer or blacksmith and able to make weapons and ornaments from the iron and copper of the wrecked vessel. Since these articles were eagerly desired by the neighboring tribes, the Clatsops soon became very wealthy in accordance with the standards of that region. Since Konapee had an ability which must have seemed to the Indians as of a magical nature he and his companions were given their freedom. He resided for a time at a village, always afterwards called Konapee, near Cape Disappointment on the broad estuary of the Columbia River which extends eastward from the Pacific Ocean for about twenty five miles, probably hoping that some ship might enter and rescue him.

This tradition is given with many circumstantial details by Dr. Franz Boas,¹ and by Mr. George Gibbs² and has been supplemented by Attorney Silas B. Smith,³ the son of Solomon H. Smith who came to Oregon with the Wyeth expedition of 1832 and married a daughter of the noted Coboway or Comowool who is so frequently mentioned by Lewis and Clark and later travelers as the chief of the Clatsop Indians who lived about Cape Disappointment and Astoria. Attorney Smith, being the child of a full blooded Indian "princess," Celiast or Helen,⁴ was familiar with tribal traditions

1 Dr. Franz Boas, *Chinook Texts*, Department of Ethnology, 1896, Washington, D.C.; reprinted by Horace S. Lyman, *History of Oregon*, 1903, New York, Volume I., pp. 370-372. See also pages 164-175, in which Dr. Lyman discusses the tradition.

2 George Gibbs, *Tribes of Western Washington and Northwestern Oregon*, Contributions to North American Ethnology, Department of the Interior, 1877, Washington, D.C. Volume I., pp. 236-237.

3 Silas B. Smith, *Beginnings of Oregon*. Proceedings of the Oregon Historical Society, 1890, Salem, Oregon, pp. 74-78.

4 For Silas B. Smith and his mother Celiast Coboway, Olin D. Wheeler, *The Trail of Lewis and Clark*, 1904, Putnam's, N.Y. Vol. II., pp. 196-197; 204-6; and Index; Leslie M. Scott, *History of the Oregon Country*. 1924, Riverside Press, Cambridge. See Index.

from his childhood,⁵ while having been educated in New Hampshire and practicing law for many years at Warrenton, Oregon, he was able to interpret and analyze the stories from the viewpoint of an intelligent professional white man. His reasons for accepting the truth of the tradition were (1) That no one would have invented the ridiculously incoherent expression that there were men who were also bears. (2) That it would not have occurred to anyone that Indians should have been surprised at seeing Indian corn, although it was not then known in that region. (3) That in after years when white men came in trading vessels they were called "Tlo-hon-nipts," a word similar to flotsam, and indicating that the first white men had been washed ashore like driftwood. (4) The Spaniards had some oriental coins of copper, with square holes in them, which the Indians used for ornaments and necklaces. When half a century later traders brought coins, the ones with square holes in the center were called Konapee money. (5) The name of the village between Cape Disappointment and Astoria was always called Konapee.⁶

This village near the entrance to the river provided an opportunity for meeting any vessel which might enter the wide inlet, and it may be well to bear in mind that Konapee lived there and was familiar with this peculiar part of the Columbia. For some reason, Konapee left the coast and all possibility of rescue, going to the Cascades, about one hundred and fifty miles up the river, where he married a native woman and had a son whom he named Soto.

It is a well known fact that articles esteemed of value by the Indians were traded from tribe to tribe for enormous distances, and that pipes and battle-axes from Dakota are known to have reached the lower Columbia.⁷ It would seem possible that, when Europeans began to trade on the Missouri River, some of their articles might have been obtained by barter or as war trophies by tribes which ranged from the buffalo country east of the Rocky Mountains to

⁵ Coboway, (Comowool, Coniah), Wheeler, (Note 4), See Index. Scott, (Note 4), Vol. II., p. 145. Elliott Caues, *The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry*, 1897, Francis P. Harper, N.Y., Vol. II., pp. 912-915.

⁶ Konopee village. *Handbook of American Indians*, Bureau of American Ethnology, 1907, Washington, D.C., Vol. I., p. 725.

⁷ A pipe bowl found in an Indian grave near Portland has been positively identified as having come from Dakota. See also *Pacific Railroad Reports*, (Explorations and Surveys) 33 Congress, 2nd Session, Ex. Doc. 78, Vol. I., p. 299. When Lieut. Broughton ascended the Columbia in 1792 the Indians had very peculiar battle-axes which they claimed to have bartered from tribes living toward the rising sun. A sketch of the weapon is in the newly discovered manuscript journal of the expedition, which Mr. George G. Heye, Museum of the American Indian, has identified as of the Sioux pattern. The writer is compiling an article with much data. Sir Alexander Mackenzie, in 1793, found iron in the possession of tribes living east of the Rocky Mountains. It had passed through three intermediate tribes from trading vessels on the coast. Alexander Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, Reprint, 1904, by Allerton Book Co., N.Y.

the great trading mart at the Dalles,⁸ and that some of the articles may have reached the lower Columbia and have been seen by Konapee and his companions, who might have decided to "back track" the European goods in order to reach civilization. This may explain why Konapee left the coast and went toward the Dalles. Yet since such articles at that date must have come very infrequently, it would account for the delay of some five or six years which Konapee spent at the Cascades. All that we know of him was that he was made a Chief and that his little son, Soto, was still young (*encore tout jeune*) when the four Spaniards assembled and started overland (*se rendre par terre*) to try to join their countrymen toward the rising sun.

The Cascade Indians resided in a number of villages from Beacon Rock⁹ below the portage to the upper end of the portage, but during the winter months they had a village named Neer-chee-ki-oo¹⁰ some thirty miles below, on the Columbia across from what is now Vancouver, Washington, and nearly opposite Ellsworth, Washington. It is known that Soto was a chief and that he must have been aged at the time when Lieutenant W. R. Broughton, of the Vancouver expedition entered the Columbia in 1792, and while the modern method of the government in using fingerprints to identify Indians was not in vogue at that time, yet it would seem probable that the chief from the Neer-chee-ki-oo village who went down to the entrance of the river, a hundred miles away, immediately upon the arrival of Broughton, was Soto. This aged chief went on board H.M.S. *Chatham* and demonstrated his friendly feeling. He accompanied Lieutenant Broughton on his survey of the river with such numerous evidences of his amicable attitude that, almost from the first, he was distinguished as "The friendly old chief" and was

8 At the Dalles the Columbia River is obstructed, about two hundred miles from the mouth. Here salmon are found in very great abundance and from time immemorial tribes from great distances have congregated there, the village of Wishram probably being the most ancient present settlement on the two American continents. Henry J. Biddle, "Wishram," *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XXVII., March, 1926, pp. 113-130. For migration from Asia, Ales Hrdlicka, *The Origin and Antiquity of the American Indian*, Smithsonian Report, 1923, Washington, D.C., Separate Publication 2778.

9 The Cascades of the Columbia are about one hundred and fifty miles from the mouth. They were formed about 1774 by a tremendous slide from Table Mountain which blocked the channel and caused the river to detour over a higher ledge, forming a lake above in which was the famous submerged forest. Beacon Rock is a great monolith nearly a thousand feet high, located just below the lowest rapids. Soto's village was close to this huge rock.

10 The Neer-chee-ki-oo village was the winter home of the tribe living in summer at the Cascades. It is depicted on Broughton's chart of 1792 and the Lewis and Clark maps. George Vancouver, *A Voyage of Discovery*, Edition 1778, Vol. II., pp. 63 and 67; Edition 1804, Vol. III., pp. 105 and 112. R. G. Thwaites, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 1905, Dodd, Mead, N.Y., Vol. VI., p. 116, Sha-ha-la Nation. Volume of Maps, No. 32, Part II., Vol. III., November 4, 1805; Vol. IV., March 31, 1806; and Clark, April 2, 1806, p. 235; April 3, 1806, p. 240; Vol. VII., Whitehouse Journal, p. 187, Journal of Patrick Gass, 1800. Many later editions, see under dates of Nov. 4, 1805, March 31, 1806.

allowed privileges which were denied to the other Indians.¹¹ The account given in Vancouver's *Voyage* and the recently discovered manuscript journal have very many mentions of this aged chief. Broughton named the part of the river by the Neer-chee-ki-oo village "Friendly Reach" in honor of this chief, and to Matthew Point, opposite the entrance of the Willamette River, he gave the name "Parting Point" because he there bid farewell to the friendly old chief.¹²

Thirteen years later Lewis and Clark wrote very much in regard to the Neer-chee-ki-oo village, but did not mention any aged chief until, on April 2, 1806, Clark visited the large permanent building and amused himself by astonishing the natives by burning a piece of port-fire and working his compass with a magnet. He was greatly amused at the amazement of the Indians and wrote "All this time a very old blind man was speaking with great vehemence, apparently imploring his God." Since it is known that Soto became blind, and that the old people from the Cascades were then at this house, this probably was old Soto. Possibly if Clark had been familiar with Spanish he might have recognized some pious phrases which Konapee had taught his little son.¹³

Before the modern engineering improvements were made on the lower Columbia there were occasional floods of great magnitude, which would have washed away the Neer-chee-ki-oo village, which was located on low ground, and it is probable that the unusual high water of 1810¹⁴ destroyed the settlement, since no traveler ever afterwards even mentioned the remains of this conspicuous village.

In 1811, a party of Astorians ascended the river, and Franchere records that on May 8th he arrived at an Indian house, apparently near Beacon Rock, and stopped for breakfast. "We found here an old blind man, who gave us a cordial reception. Our guide [Coalpo] said that he was a white man, and that his name was Soto. We learned from the mouth of the old man himself, that he was the son of a Spaniard who had been wrecked at the mouth of the river; that a part of the crew on this occasion got safe ashore, but were all massacred by the Clatsops, with the exception of four, who were

11 The manuscript journal of the Broughton expedition states that the old chief had visited H.M.S. *Chatham* and was allowed special privileges denied to other Indians.

12 For the numerous references to the friendly old chief, see Vancouver's *Voyage*, London, Edition 1798. Vol. II., pp. 63-67; Edition 1804. Vol. III., pp. 105-112.

13 Thwaites, (Note 10), Vol. IV., p. 235. The Biddle edition wrongly states that it was an old woman. James K. Hosmer, *History of the Expedition of Captains Lewis and Clark*, 1902, McClurg, Chicago, Vol. II., p. 231.

14 The fort commenced by Winship, 1810, must have been on ground not subject to ordinary high water, while the occasional high waters reached land above ordinary high water. This indicates that there was one of the very great floods in 1810. H. H. Bancroft, *History of the Northwest Coast*, N.Y., Vol. II., pp. 132-135.

spared and who married native women; that these four Spaniards, of whom his father was one, disgusted with the savage life, attempted to reach a settlement of their own nation (*quelque établissement de blancs*) overland (*par terre*), but had never been heard of since; and that when his father, with his companions, left the country, he himself was yet quite young."¹⁵ When J. V. Huntington translated the French edition he probably supposed that the Spaniards had then reached California, and so altered Franchere's expression "overland" (*par terre*) into "toward the south;" but this was before any establishments had been made in California. Franchere adds a note "These facts, if they were authenticated, would prove that the Spaniards were the first who discovered the mouth of the Columbia. . . ." The findings of Dr. Boas, George Gibbs and Attorney Smith have corroborated the facts, but discovery requires other elements.

Two months afterwards, David Thompson, while ascending the river, landed not far from Beacon Rock, July 27, 1811, and wrote in his journal: "A canoe with a blind good old Chief came to us and smoked." In his *Narrative* he states that this blind Chief was the only person he saw who was so afflicted, which would seem to identify Soto with the aged blind man whom Clark saw.¹⁶

Three years after when Alexander Henry visited this locality he twice mentioned the Soto village, near Beacon Rock (1814).¹⁷

It would appear that while the Indians considered that Soto was a white man, because of his being the son of a Spaniard, yet his skin must have been dark.¹⁸ His daughter, however, was much lighter than the Indians, and during her old age had gray hair. It is possible that some of his descendants still live in Oregon and Washington, since the descendants of the last chief of the Cascade tribe are very positive that the chieftainship of that tribe was hereditary; in which case the chief who was so friendly toward Lewis and Clark, and to whom they gave a medal, probably was the son of old Soto. The fact that this silver medal is still treasured as a

15 G. Franchere, Fils, *Relation d'un Voyage*, 1820, Montreal, p. 85. J. V. Huntington, *Franchere's Narrative*, 1854, New York, p. 113. R. G. Thwaites, *Early Western Travels*, Vol. VI., pp. 248-249.

16 "Journal of David Thompson," annotated by T. C. Elliott, *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XV., June, 1914, p. 111. David Thompson, *Narrative*, Champlain Society, Toronto, p. 512.

17 Elliott Coues, *Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry*, 1897, Francis P. Harper, Vol. II., pp. 799; 809.

18 Smith, (Note 3). Gibbs, (Note 2).

family heirloom would suggest that his Spanish blood still flows in the veins of his descendants.¹⁹

The question as to what became of Konapee and his comrades is shrouded with mystery, and it is with great diffidence that the writer presents the few scattered items which may possibly aid in throwing light upon the subject, fully recognizing that it is necessarily largely conjecture, and yet may be the means of some historians being able to unearth some actual facts of very great interest.

The Indians appeared to have been impressed by the fact that while the Spaniards came from the direction of the setting sun they claimed that their home was toward the rising sun. This is inferred from the fact that the tradition has lingered that their home was toward the eastward.

It is certain that articles from Dakota reached this region in early times, for battle-axes made of the Siouan type were found by the Broughton expedition in 1792, and the natives said that they had been bartered from tribes to the eastward.²⁰ The noted trading mart at the Dalles was frequented by Indians who also ranged to the east of the Rocky Mountains, and the idea of "back-tracking" European articles would seem to be the only plausible explanation for the desperate journey of the Spaniards.

There is an Indian tradition that the Spaniards were at the Dalles, and that the Indians claimed that the manner of talking by one of them was like the buzzing of insects. He fled and hid in a cave but was discovered and killed. A tradition among the Clatsops also is that they went to the Dalles.²¹

It is known that frequently white men could join some tribe and live with them in perfect security,²² and it would seem probable that the Spaniards intended to join first one tribe and then another, gradually working their way toward the east.

Major R. D. Gwydir was for many years Indian Agent for the Spokanes on their reservation, and he informed the writer that there was a belief among them that some white men had been with their tribe very many years before the coming of Lewis and Clark.²³

¹⁹ For medal given by Lewis and Clark, Thwaites, (Note 10), Vol. IV., pp. 266 and 270. This medal was of a very unusual kind. Bauman Belden, *Indian Peace Medals*, American Numismatic Society, Broadway and 156 St., N.Y., 1927, pp. 22-24. The identification was made by Mr. Howland Wood, Curator of the Society, September 14, 1927, at the request of the writer. An illustration is shown in James G. Swan's *The Northwest Coast, or Three Years Residence in Washington Territory*, 1857, Harper Bros., N.Y., p. 407. The precious heirloom is owned by the granddaughters of Chief Chenowith, Mrs. Mary V. Lane, Underwood, Wash., and her sister Mrs. Isabel Underwood.

²⁰ Gibbs. (Note 2).

²¹ This tradition was told to the writer by Mrs. Mary V. Lane (Note 19).

²² Gibbs (Note 2).

²³ Major Gwydir resided at 2510 Boone Avenue, Spokane, Wash., in 1921. He stated that he had published the account in an article for the *Spokane Evening Chronicle*.

H. H. Bancroft makes the statement "Long ago the natives of the upper Columbia had their Spanish guest, who came they knew not whence, and went they knew not whither."²⁴ Since these were the only Spaniards known in that region during early times, it would indicate that only one survived, and since Konapee seems to have been peculiarly admired by Indians, as he was made a chief of the Clatsops,²⁵ it would probably have been he, especially if he induced the savages to suppose that he had magical power.

He might easily have remained with some tribe until after they should have crossed the Rocky Mountains to the buffalo country. The old original trail appears to have been via Flathead Lake and Marias Pass,²⁶ and it may be well to bear in mind this allusion to Flathead Lake. Having reached the Missouri it would have been possible to join first one tribe and then another, probably during many years, until at last he could have reached the utmost frontier settlement, which, at that time, probably would have been Fort Mackinac, presumably about 1750-60.

M. Le Page du Pratz devotes forty-five pages to some very extraordinary stories told to him by an aged chief named Moncachtape (with acute accent on the "e") who claimed to have ascended the Missouri River about 1747 and then went to the Pacific Ocean where he saw white men with beards (*les hommes barbus*)²⁷ He seemed to lay especial stress upon the long black beards (*une barbe longue & noire*). His story seems highly improbable, and yet also appears to have some elements of truth. Merely as a suggestion.—Presuming that he did ascend the Missouri at that time, which is about the time that Konapee should have been there, and had actually met the old heavily bearded Spaniard and learned from him some of his adventures, it might have provided him with the material which could be skilfully worked up to edify the gullable M. Du Pratz and account for the element of truth. Since it was a common practice of the Indians to take the names of some white man whom they admired, it is possible that Moncachtape may have been another attempt to pronounce Konapee's Spanish name.

The historian, Mr. T. C. Elliott, has performed a most valuable service in publishing the important documents relating to Major

²⁴ Bancroft, *Northwest Coast*, (Note 14), Volume II., p. 532.

²⁵ Gibbs. (Note 2).

²⁶ Marias Pass, Robert Greenhow, *Memoir*, 1840, Map; John Dunn, *History of Oregon Territory*, London, 1844; Philadelphia, 1845, p. 348; Bancroft, *Northwest Coast* (Note 14) I., p. 628; *Pacific Railroad Reports*, (Note 7), Vol. XII., very conspicuous on map, picture facing p. 178; Vol. I., pp. 542, 548; Vol. XII, pp. 185, 248.

²⁷ Le Page du Pratz, *Histoire de la Louisiane*, 1758, Paris. Vol. III., pp. 88-133. Bancroft, *Northwest Coast*, (Note 14), Vol. I., 598-607; Vol. II., 531-532.

Robert Rogers who, in 1760, was sent to take the French fort at Mackinac.²⁸ Although Major Rogers was born in Vermont and had spent his life in the wilderness, and therefore probably had never given one thought to the Pacific Ocean, yet from that time he seemed obsessed with a belief that there was a practicable route by the headwaters of the Missouri, "To cross thence a Portage of about thirty miles, into the great River Ourigan: to follow this great River, through a vast, and most populous Tract of Indian Country to the Straits of Anian,²⁹ and the Gulf or Bay projecting thence north-easterly into the Continent."³⁰

Again "You will travel West bearing to the Northwest and do you endeavor to fall in with the great River Ourigan which rises in several different branches between the Latitudes Fifty six and forty eight and runs Westward for near three hundred Leagues, when it is at no great distance from each other joined by one from the South and a little up the Stream by one from the North [This would seem to indicate the juncture of the Snake and with the Yakima flowing in just to the northward. To continue:] "about these forks you will find an Inhabited Country and great Riches," [Lewis and Clark mention the very many Indians in that locality] "the Gold is up the river that comes in from the North at about three Days Journey from their great Town" [The mention of gold seems always an inducement. Wishram was a great trading mart of the Indians] "near the mouth of it at the South West side of a large Mountain," [Mount Adams] "but there is not any Iron Ore that is known to be work't among them" [This indicates an idea of a blacksmith] (. . .some more about gold).³¹

"From where the above Rivers join this great River Ourigan it becomes larger and about four hundred Leagues as the River runs from this Town above mentioned it discharges itself into an Arm or Bay of the Sea at near the Latitude of fifty four and bends Southerdly and empties into the Pacifick Ocean about forty eight, nine or fifty, where it is narrow, but to the Northwest where you

28 T. C. Elliott, "The Origin of the Name Oregon," *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XXII., June, 1921, pp. 91-115; also by same author, "Jonathan Carver's Source for the Name Oregon," Vol. XXIII., March, 1922, pp. 53-69; Mr. O. O. Holmes, of the N.Y. Public Library, found a letter by Major Rogers in which he refers to his design for the discovery of the Northwest Passage, in the *Pennsylvania Historical Society Papers* by F. M. Ettington, Volume of Colonial Wars.

29 The name was identified by H. R. Wagner from Marco Polo's *Ania* and this identification was approved by Godfrey Sykes in the *American Geographical Review* for March, 1929, page 175.

30 Rogers's petition to the King, 1772, Public Record Offices, London, Class 323, Vol. 27, p. 143, *Oregon Historical Quarterly* (Note 28), XXII, June, 1921, p. 108.

31 Public Service Offices, Treasury Solicitor, General Series 4957, Rogers's instructions to Captain James Tute, 1766, *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XXIII., March, 1922, pp. 66-67.

join this Bay of the Sea at the Entrence of the River Ourigan the Bay is wide."

Major Rogers also mentions "The almost constant Direction of the Winds on the western Coast of North-America from the pacific Ocean."³²

Major Rogers claims that he derived his information from the Indians, yet since it is obvious that no Indian could have traveled through many hostiles tribes to the Pacific and have returned, his life-long familiarity with the unrelaible character of Indian stories would hardly have created in his mind such a firm conviction of there being a practicable route. For twelve years after first reaching Fort Mackinac he was obsessed with his intense conviction, and twice he traveled to London and petitioned the King for authority to fit out an expedition. The valuable documents printed by Mr. T. C. Elliott contain much additional information and are well worth careful study.³³

The inquiries made by Lewis and Clark, many years later and when much nearer the Rocky Mountains than Fort Mackinac, prove that there was no knowledge of the Oregon or Columbia River and its discharge into a bay extending eastward from the Pacific. Although Roger's information is vague and sadly jumbled with gold, the Straits of Anian and the Northwest Passage yet it certainly does contain some elements of truth. The map of Captain Jonathan Carver, whom Rogers sent under Captain Tute in 1766, seems to show Flathead Lake.³⁴

It would be ridiculous to claim that Major Rogers actually did meet old bearded Konapee at Fort Mackinac, yet there is no one except Konapee who could have supplied the distorted information which Major Rogers undoubtedly did possess. While purely hypothetical, yet in order to account for Major Rogers' knowledge, suppose that when Major Rogers went to Fort Mackinac, in 1760, he had met Konapee, and learned from the old Spanish blacksmith of his long journey, of the long inlet at the mouth of the Columbia where Konapee had lived, and the prevailing westerly winds, of the lack of iron in that region, and the short portage across the Rockies, near Flathead Lake and via Marias Pass to the Missouri

³² Note 30, p. 109.

³³ T. C. Elliott, "The Strange Case of Jonathan Carver and the Name Oregon," *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XXI., December, 1920, p. 350.

³⁴ For available reprints of Carver's maps, Charles H. Carey, *History of Oregon*, 1922, Chicago, pp. 34 and 117. "In the future something may be found to disclose who did actually set eye upon some of the physical conditions existing west of the Rockies and appearing on maps published before and during the time of Jonathan Carver, Flathead Lake, for instance." T. C. Elliott, *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, Volume XXVI., March, 1925, p. 25.

River; while purely a supposition, yet this would explain Major Rogers' intense conviction and his knowledge, however vague and distorted it may have been; which otherwise is utterly and profoundly inexplicable; while if he did meet Konapee, then all is perfectly clear, and also why the Great River of the West had the obviously Spanish name OREGON.

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