

The Washington Historical Quarterly

REMINISCENCES OF A PIONEER OF THE TERRITORY OF WASHINGTON

In the summer of 1849 President Taylor appointed John P. Gaines Governor of Oregon Territory, to succeed Joseph Lane, Oregon's first Governor, appointed the year before by President Polk. At the same time Taylor appointed Edward Hamilton Territorial Secretary, and William Strong one of the three Judges of the District Court for the Territory. Simultaneously order was issued for the United States store ship Supply—one of the Government's smallest sail vessels—to be fitted up with a cabin amidships, and staterooms around the cabin, and the officers named with their families were invited to take passage on her for the Pacific. Governor Gaines and family, General Hamilton and family and Judge Strong and family (of which I was constituted one member) left the Brooklyn Navy Yard in December, 1849, on this small vessel. Stop was made at Rio Janeiro, Brazil, where we took the yellow fever aboard, Governor Gaines losing two daughters and Judge Strong one son in consequence. Somewhat on account of the fever the vessel next put in at St. Catherine's, six hundred miles south of Rio, where we made a prolonged stay. In rounding Cape Horn we were driven down to the sixteenth degree of south latitude. Our next call was at Valparaiso, Chile, where I had my first experience with earthquakes, and from there we came straight to San Francisco. There we were all transferred to the United States sloop of war Falmouth, Captain Pettigrew, who had received orders to take us to Astoria, where we landed on the 13th day of August, 1850.

Great was the disappointment of the officials on finding that the little river steamer Multnomah, the only steam vessel on the Columbia at that time, and which they had been told would be at Astoria to take them up the river, was laid up for repairs, and that Captain Hoyt, its owner, had gone to San Francisco for new machinery. How to get to

Oregon City, our place of destination, became a serious problem. The day after our landing an employee of the Hudson Bay Company came over from Scarborough Point, and on learning the situation suggested that word be sent to Peter Skene Ogden, Chief Factor and Governor of the Hudson Bay Company, whose headquarters were at Fort Vancouver, asking him to send a batteau for us; otherwise we would probably be detained three weeks at Astoria. Governor Gaines at once wrote to Governor Ogden, and the company man referred to got an Indian to take the letter to him. It was a new and interesting sight to us to see that Indian start off in his "ikt man kanim" for a trip of about one hundred miles up one of the grandest rivers in the world, and how anxiously we waited to know the result, frequently walking up to Tongue Point and scanning the large bay above. The people of Astoria, few then in number, were very kind, and told us that that would be the quickest way of getting up the river, as the mail steamer from San Francisco to Portland would not be along for almost a month. They knew Governor Ogden, and were sure he would do the best he could for us, as he was the man who, of his own motion, ransomed and rescued the white prisoners in the hands of the Indians at the time of the Whitman massacre.

In a few days a large batteau arrived, bringing a cordial welcome from Ogden. It did not take long to load such of our belongings as were necessary into that boat, and as soon as the tide began flooding the next day we started. The first night brought us to Cathlamet, where we were welcomed by Mr. James Birnie, a retired factor of the Hudson Bay Company, who, with his family, had lived there many years. Mrs. Birnie gave the ladies every attention, and Mr. Birnie took care of the men. Judge Strong was greatly pleased with this locality, and afterwards settled there. It was in Oregon then. The next day we went on, landing when necessary, spreading our blankets on the ground at night, until in a few days we arrived at Fort Vancouver. How different such a trip from one on the same river today. How few of the inhabitants of the State of Washington have had such an experience?

Judge Strong's wife and infant child and I remained at Fort Vancouver, but after lightening the batteau as much as possible the Governor and Secretary, with their families, and Judge Strong, were taken to Oregon City, the capital. The Judge soon returned, and I went there in a canoe. There were no houses on the east side of the river at Portland, and very few on the west. Between Portland and Oregon City was a sandbar, on which at that time there was so little water that large canoes had to be poled over it. It was for this reason that the batteau was made as light as possible at Fort Vancouver.

While in Oregon City I learned that about three months prior to that time five Indian chiefs had been hanged there as instigators of the massacre of Dr. Marcus Whitman and others at the Whitman mission. I was deeply interested in learning all I could in relation to this bloody affair, I having gone to school with the two Nez Perce Indian boys, John I-ce and Richard Tac-i-tu-i-tis, whom Dr. Whitman brought with him from Oregon, and left at Rushville, N. Y. (his native place and where I then lived) during the winter of 1835-'36, when he went east and married Narcissa Prentice. I also listened to a talk he gave in the old Rushville church in the spring of 1843, when he was again there to visit his mother, at which time I became so interested in the Indians and in the climate of Oregon that I wanted to go there with him, but he said he wanted married men, and, as I lacked two months of being seventeen years old, I did not fill that requirement. He comforted me, however, by saying, "the Indians need good doctors, and when you have finished your education, and studied medicine, we will be glad to have you come."

In 1850 all but a very few white Americans in Oregon were residents of Willamette Valley. During the two following years the number north of the Columbia was greatly increased, probably multiplied by three. By that time I had been over the land sufficiently to convince me that there was plenty of room on that side for a great Territory or State, and that in due time there would be one, of which I hoped and expected to become a citizen, and why I did not will be told later on.

In the winter of 1850-'51 Judge Strong had a house (and I afterwards built one) at Cathlamet. The people of Cathlamet a year or so later were so many and so ambitious that they schemed to secure a road to Puget Sound. They interested the people of Elohamon Valley, which lay back of Cathlamet and had its only outlet thru that town, in the idea, and arrangements were finally made to survey the line for a road as far as Boisfort Prairie. We engaged a young man to go with the party as surveyor. He had come to Cathlamet, and they were nearly all ready to start, when unfortunately he cut his foot so severely with the hatchet while sharpening a stake as to prevent his going. I had to go in his place. I was accompanied by Mr. Dray, Mr. Anderson, Mr. Stilwell, Newell Brewer, all owners of property in the Elohamon Valley, and two Indians. We had a pretty hard time of it, however, as it took much longer than we expected, and the packer was careless, and lost or wasted not only our provisions, but our ammunition as well, so we were without food for five days. When we got to Boisfort Prairie, we were given a sumptuous meal at the home of Fred A. Clarke, it being prepared by Mrs. Clarke, who, now of Puyallup, is one of the few survivors at this time of those long

gone-by days. There was one creek that took us a long time to find a way across. It had cut a channel nearly or quite 200 feet wide, and of great depth, with almost perpendicular sides. Fifteen feet down was a stratum of sea shells twelve feet thick, the same on both sides, showing conclusively that the shore of the great Pacific Ocean was once there. Above this stratum of shells was about fifteen feet of rich soil. We found the route impracticable, as road building was then understood. What has become of my field notes of that survey I do not know. The entire expense of this survey was borne by the parties whose property would have been benefited had the road been built.

In 1850 there were very few white men north of the Columbia River from its mouth to Vancouver and beyond, except those connected with the Hudson Bay Company. In the latter part of 1851 and the early part of 1852 they came in considerable numbers, and there were so many people in the fall of the latter year that a convention was called and held at Monticello, near the mouth of the Cowlitz River, which petitioned Congress to divide Oregon Territory and create the Territory of Columbia in that part north of the river. The petitioners were somewhat surprised to learn that Congress not only refused to name the new Territory Columbia, but insisted upon naming it Washington, to which the convention members and other persons chiefly concerned were obliged to submit. It was only about fifteen months from the date of holding that convention that the new Territory desired was in complete running order, with full list of officials, Legislature and courts. I was a member of the first House of Representatives, from Pacific County. The Legislature met at Olympia Feb. 27th, 1854, but I was not sworn in until April 14th. (See page 97 of Journal.)

Another person, whose name I cannot now recall, and myself surveyed the east part of Mrs. Esther Shorts' land claim into town lots, blocks and streets, and the first Legislative Assembly, in March, 1854, passed an act naming this land, so surveyed by us, "Columbia City," and made it the county seat of Clarke County. (See page 475, Statutes First Legislative Assembly.) Columbia City is the Vancouver of the present day.

When Judge Strong found that the meager salary paid a United States Judge would not support his family, tho in New York, where we were from, it would have been more than ample—the costs of living being very much greater on the Pacific Coast—he tendered his resignation, and as soon as his successor—who was an unmarried man—arrived, and was sworn in, he commenced the practice of his profession. He spent the long remainder of his days in Oregon, a prominent member of the bar and an honored citizen of the State.

In the latter part of 1852 First Lieutenant Ulysses S. Grant came to Fort Vancouver with a part of his regiment, the Fourth Infantry, in which he rendered special services as quartermaster. He lived in the barracks with the other officers. He never had a house to himself, contrary to what I have seen stated. While he was at Fort Vancouver, he and Judge Strong became warm friends, and he would sometimes get a leave of absence, and spend the time with the judge in Cathlamet. While at Vancouver Grant and other officers joined in planting a large field of potatoes. The river rose and covered the vines so long and so deep that the potatoes were spoiled, and never dug. He also, in 1853, equipped and supplied the railroad exploration and survey parties of the Government in Washington under Captain George B. McClellan and Governor I. I. Stevens. He was promoted to a captaincy, and after about a year's stay at Vancouver, took command of his company at a post in California, from which he resigned his commission in 1854, going to Missouri and later to Illinois and engaging in the pursuits of civil life until the outbreak of the war in 1861, when he reentered the army.

October 11th, 1854, John S. Clendenin, United States Attorney for the Territory of Washington, appointed and commissioned me assistant United States Attorney, and placed me in charge of all his business. He then left for the Eastern States, and never returned. The next year I was elected Prosecuting Attorney for the First Judicial District of Washington Territory.

When the Indian war broke out, in 1855, I joined a military company, and served until discharged. My brother William also enlisted, and was made captain of a company of mounted riflemen.

In the spring of 1856 the judges concluded that on account of the war they would hold no courts until the next fall, so the farmers might put in their crops, repair damages, etc. In the summer of that year, John D. Biles, who was a member of the House in the first Legislature at the time I was, and who was then clerk of the United States District Court at Vancouver, and myself, taking advantage of the court vacation, left for the States, expecting to return together, prior to the resumption of work by the judges. He returned, but I did not, for this reason: I had an aged mother, who was much opposed to my going back, and when it came near to the time for me to start became seriously ill, and asked me to promise her that I would not return as long as she lived, which I did. She then began to improve, and lived nearly five years, dying about two months before the breaking out of the civil war, during which time I had gone into business and married. When the war began I immediately raised a company, was elected its captain, and we were mustered into service in the

Twenty-First Regiment of New York Volunteer Infantry, on the 7th day of May, 1861. I served as captain for six months, and was then promoted to lieutenant colonel and colonel of the Thirty-Eighth Regiment, New York Volunteer Infantry, and afterwards to brigadier general by brevet. I was wounded twice in battle, the last time by a conical ball passing entirely thru my body, tearing out my right hip joint, and making me a cripple for life, stiffening the hip, and shortening the leg three and a half inches.

When at Fort Vancouver, W. T., I became personally well acquainted with Captain Rufus Ingalls, who was quartermaster of the post there, and after I was wounded I was taken to Fortress Monroe, and placed in the Hygeia Hospital. The next morning I was greatly surprised to be called upon by Major General Rufus Ingalls, Quartermaster General of the Army of the Potomac. He was exceedingly kind, gave me every attention possible, and was of great assistance to me.

My brother, John C. Strong, came to Fortress Monroe, and took me home to Buffalo, N. Y., on an army litter. After I had recovered from my wounds so as to be able to get around on crutches, President Lincoln commissioned me a colonel in the Veteran Reserve Corps, which commission I prize very highly, as it bears his autograph. I was then assigned to the Fifteenth Regiment, Veteran Reserve Corps, and sent to command the post at Chicago, which included Camp Douglas, thus relieving General Ammon from command of the post, and Colonel C. V. Deland, of the First Michigan Sharpshooters, who were guarding the prisoners, and who immediately thereafter went to the front. When the number of prisoners became so great that one Veteran Reserve Corps Regiment, every man of which was wounded, was not considered sufficient to guard them, Brigadier General Sweet, who was also colonel of the Eighth Regiment, Veteran Reserve Corps, came, bringing a battery of artillery, which organizations, with my regiment, gave him ample force to take care of the prisoners. General Sweet ranked me, which, of course, gave him command of the post.

I was ordered to report to General George G. Meade, in Philadelphia, who would instruct me how to close up camps, and furnish me with the proper papers. This I did, and I was kept in service, and sent to close up the different camps thruout the country, and was not mustered out until June 30, 1866. I then went to my home in Buffalo, N. Y., and practised law for a while. Later I was appointed United States Assessor of Internal Revenue, and afterwards United States Circuit Court Commissioner.

My wounds so shattered my nervous system that I suffered greatly in cold weather, and in January, 1896, I brought my family to Los Gatos, Santa Clara County, California, where we resided on a ranch in the foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains at the southerly edge of the beautiful Santa Clara Valley, until June, 1911, when we removed to Oakland, Alameda County. I am today, May 6th, 1912, 86 years of age.

Remaining in the East was a great disappointment to me, as all my interests then were in the new Territory of Washington, where I intended to make my home, but I considered my duty to my aged mother paramount to all others.

JAMES C. STRONG.