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## EXPLORATION OF THE UPPER COLUMBIA

Of the five earliest transcontinental expeditions to the Pacific, students of Northwest history know two by heart: the second (Lewis and Clark, 1805-06) and the fifth (the Overland Astorians, 1811-12). The first (Mackenzie, 1793) and the third (Fraser 1808) are also familiar to us in never varying detail. But an unkind fate, aided by a journal too voluminous for publication (40 vol. foolscap, 100 pp. per vol.) has almost buried in obscurity the knowledge of the fourth, that by the astronomer and geographer, David Thompson (1810-11); and when even the bare outlines have at times emerged, the sketch has been fragmentary and inaccurate, and the details (attempted by Bancroft and others) imaginary. This is all the more to be regretted by the people of Washington, because Thompson's was the only party of the five to cross our state entirely. This it accomplished both by river and by land. David Thompson discovered the sources of the Columbia, explored the Upper Columbia, and was the first to voyage over every foot of this, the Pacific Coast's mightiest river.

Through the courtesy of Mr. Aubrey White, Deputy Minister Lands and Forests, Toronto, I have been furnished a copy of Bk. 27, Vol. II., of Thompson's journal, detailing his "Voyage to the Mouth of the Columbia; by D. Thompson and 7 men on the part of the New Company." As Dr. Coues says of the entire journal, the manuscript "consists of astronomical calculations, traverse tables and other mathematical data," which makes it "largely unreadable"; but this did not deter me from an attempt to put before the people of the Northwest a readable account, which should at the same time be as accurate in time and place as could be made out by his "watch of little worth" and his "compass always vibrating, caused by the many eddys and whirlpools which continually turned the canoe from side to side."

June 27, 1807, Thompson crossed Howse Pass in the Canadian Rockies and came to a little rill "whose current," he wrote without hesitation, "descends to the Pacific Ocean—may God in his mercy give me to

see where its waters flow into the ocean and return in safety." Little did he dream then of the 1,150 miles of Columbia, the interminable maze of lakes connected by the windings of the Kootenay, Clark's Fork, and Upper Columbia, or of the four and a quarter years of hardships verging at times on starvation, that lay between Howse Pass and his finished work. He built a raft and descended the tumultuous Blaeberry Creek; but when he reached the Columbia he was surprised to find the great river flowing northeast instead of southwest, as McKenzie had described the Tacouche Tesse (Frazer had not yet explored the Tacouche Tesse to the sea, thus showing that it was not the Columbia). From the Indians Thompson learned that the river made a great detour to the north; so instead of going down, he went up stream, i. e., south, to Lake Windermere, at the foot of which he established a post, Kootenay House, on the west bank of the Columbia. In 1808 he returned from east of the Rockies to this post, arriving November 10, after a horseback journey of sixteen days. Here he wintered till April 27, 1809.

During the summer of 1809 he explored the Kootenay south into Montana and Idaho, and struck across country on horseback to Clark's Fork. September 9, he arrived at Pend d'Oreille and built a post on the lake. September 28 he started on an expedition down Clark's Fork some distance into Washington. October 2 he started back up the river, evidently bewildered by the fact that all the tributaries of the great river turned and continued northward. He returned to Pend d'Oreille, continued up Clark's Fork into Montana, swung north again to the Kootenay, back again to his post on Pend d'Oreille, and up Clark's Fork again into Montana, where he built Saleesh House and wintered, 1809-10. During the winter he made three exploring trips, on one of which he ascended Clark's Fork to its formation by the Missoula and Flathead rivers. He left Saleesh House April 19, reached Pend d'Oreille April 21, sent his canoes north the 23d, explored south to the Spokane by the 25th, turned north again, and by way of the Kootenay, the Columbia, and Blaeberry Creek reached Howse Pass June 18, where he crossed in snow four feet deep. He had left his packs of fur behind in charge of McMillan, to wait for horses.

From July 22 to October 29, 1810, occurs one of the very few blanks in his remarkable journal of fifty years. From the journal of Alexander Henry the Younger, however, we learn that Thompson went east; as far as Montreal, according to Henry, but this is surely a mistake. At whatever place he stopped he learned of the preparations for the Astor expeditions by sea and land. This news started him out once more, on the crowning achievement of his life.

Obstacles came thick and fast, but he did not flinch the task. In October, 1810, his Columbia canoes on ahead were turned back from Howse Pass by the Piegan Indians, who had constituted themselves guardians of the pass, to keep Thompson from taking firearms to their enemies, the Flatheads, and to capture the rich store of furs which his posts west of the mountains were sending east. For once all of Alexander Henry's resources in debauching Indians with liquor failed; they would not decamp. The only other northern pass then known across the Rockies was Peace River, which would take Thompson's expedition a thousand miles out of his way and put him on the upper Frazer instead of the Columbia. Though his provisions were short and winter was coming on, he decided to force a new road across the Rockies. He struck northward towards the Athabaska, "cutting his way," so Henry reports, "through a wretched, thick woody country, over mountains and gloomy muskagues, and nearly starving, animals being scare in that quarter.\* \* Their case was pitiful." December 5, on the Athabaska, he began building sleds, the thermometer registering 4 below zero. December 14, in dire extremities, he dispatched seven men to Henry for supplies. His men were distracted and suffering to the verge of mutiny. December 18 the thermometer stood 36 below zero. December 29 he started again, his two dogs to each sled swimming through a deep snow road beaten down by the snowshoes of his men. New Year's Day, 1811, the poor dogs were unable to move their loads. A cache was made, and with light loads they struggled on. January 8, Du Nord, one of his men, "beat a dog useless and the sled we made got broke and was with the dog thrown aside." January 10, he discovered Athabaska Pass. Next day, in the course of holding down a little brook, he called Du Nord "a poor, spiritless wretch," and ordered him back, but relented. January 12 he wrote his pitiful plight on boards, to be carried back to Henry's post, there copied, and forwarded to the Northwest Partners. January 14 his dogs could no longer haul their loads. He abandoned everything not absolutely necessary, including his tent; "courage of the men sinking fast, though the snow was only 3 to 3½ feet deep; and they were told it was no matter if it was 20 feet deep, provided they could get over it; but when men are in a strange country fears gather in them from every object." January 20 Du Nord deserted under critical circumstances; January 21 the expedition reached the Columbia. Thompson wanted to go up the river to Kootenay House, but his men were dispirited, "useless as old women." January 26 Le Tendre and Deaw deserted, overcome with fear at the prospect before them. Thompson moved down the river, northward a few miles, to Canoe River, the very

northernmost point of the Columbia. Here the great river doubles on itself and turns south. Thompson's puzzle of the last three years was solved.

At Canoe Camp he built boats, and April 17, with four men, started south up the Columbia, traversed Windermere Lake, portaged to the Kootenay, descended that river to Idaho, crossed to Clark's Fork, and then crossed south to Spokane House, which his men had built in advance of him. He reached here June 15. He had by this swing visited every one of his posts except Saleesh House. At Spokane he took to the canoe again, going down the Spokane to the Columbia, and up the Columbia to Kettle Falls, whence he intended to start on his dash for the Pacific.

It is this part of the trip that holds greatest interest for us. With seven men and two Simpoil Indians, he started from Kettle Falls July 3, "down the Columbia river to explore this river in order to open out a passage for the interior trade with the Pacific Ocean." The first night was spent with the Simpoil Indians, three-quarters of a mile up the San Poil river from the Columbia. Thompson gives the following account of his reception:

"On our arrival at the Simpoil camp, we pitched our tents. No one approached us till we sent for them to come and smoke. The chief then made a speech, and then the men all followed him in file and sat down round the tent, bringing a present of two dried salmon, with about half a bushel of various roots and berries for food. The chief again made a speech in a more singing loud smart tone; smoking, with four pipes. When all the tobacco I had given for this purpose was done, during the last pipes being smoked, one of the Simpoil Indians who had come with me related in a low voice all the news he had heard and seen, which the chief in his speech told again to his people. At the end of every three or four sentences he made a step, which was answered by all the people calling in a loud voice, OY! The smoking being done and the news being all told, I then told the chief what I had to say of my voyage to the sea. Each six or seven sentences I also made a step, which the chief in his relation to his people punctually followed, and they also regularly answered as before. I took notice that good and bad news, life and death, were always pronounced in the same manner, and that the answer was always the same. A few pipes were now lighted, and they were told this was enough for the present. They gave a long thankful OY, continuing a few minutes.

"After, a man came asking permission for the women to come and see us and make us a small present. To this we consented, provided they brought us no ectoway, as we found these roots bring on the colic. They came, accompanied by all the men, and altogether formed a circle round

us, the women placing themselves directly opposite us, half being on the right and half on the left of a man painted as if for war, with black and red, and his head highly ornamented with feathers. The rest of the men extended to the women on either hand. The men brought their presents and placed them before me, which consisted wholly of bitter and white and ectoway roots, with a few arrow-root berries. The women had all painted themselves; although there were a few tolerable faces among them, yet from the paint, etc., not one could be pronounced bearable. The men are all of a middling size, moderately muscular, well limbed, and of a tolerably good mien.

"The women, we thought, were all of rather small stature, clean made; and none of them seemed to labor under any bodily defects. Having smoked a few pipes, we said the visit was long enough. This was received as usual with a thankful OY, and they withdrew except a few old men, who stayed a few minutes longer and then went away. As the chief was going, my men wished to see them dance. I told the chief, who was highly pleased with the request. He instantly made a short speech to them; and all of them, young and old, men, women, and children, began a dance to the sound of their own voices only, having no instrument of any kind whatever. The song was a mild, simple music; the cadence measured, but the figure of the dance quite mild and irregular. On one side stood all the old people of both sexes. They formed groups of 4 to 10, who danced in time, hardly stirring out of the same spot. All the young and active formed a great large group on the other side, men, women, and children mixed, dancing, first up as far as the line of the old people extended, then turning round and dancing down to the same extent, each of this large group touching each other with closeness. This continued for about eight minutes, when, the song being finished, each person sat down on the ground in the spot he happened to be when the song was done. The chief made a speech of about one or two minutes long. As soon as this was ended the song directly began; and each person starting up filed to dancing the same figure as before. They observed no order in their places, but mingled as chance brought them together. We remarked a young, active woman who always danced out of the crowd and kept in close along us, and always left the others far behind. This was noticed by the chief, who at length called her to order, either to dance with the others or take a partner. She chose both, but still kept close to us, with her partner leading up the dance. Having danced twice in this way, the chief told them to dance a third time for that we might be preserved on the strong rapids we had to run down on our way to the sea. This they seemingly performed with great good will. Having danced about an hour, they finished and

returned. The dust of their feet fairly obscured the dancers, although we stood only four feet from them, as they danced on a piece of dusty ground in the open air. Their huts are of slight poles tied together, covered with mats of slight rushes,—sufficient defense in this season; and they are considered altogether as moderately cleanly; although very poorly clothed, especially the men, as animals are very scarce, and they are too poorly armed to obtain any spoil of worth from the chase.”

July 4, in running the rapids above Bridgeport, “they run too close to a drift tree on a rock, which tore partly the top lath away and struck Ignace out of the stern of the canoe. Although he had never swam before in his life, he swam so as to keep himself above the waves till they turned the canoe around and took him up.” The river was now at its flood time.

Next morning they came upon an Oachenawagan [Okonogan] chief and sixty men, with their women and children, who made them “a present of a good roasted salmon, and a bushel of arrow-root berries, and two bushels of bitter white roots.” A rain coming up, Thompson made presents of tobacco, rings, and hawk’s bells, and sent the Indians away. At 2½ P. M. they returned singing; smoked again, and discoursed of the country to the Okonogan River. Thompson continues:

“They offered to dance for our good voyage and preservation to the sea and back again, and that they might be as well every way as at the present. We accepted the offer. They all, both men, women, and children, formed a line in elipsis. They danced with the sun in a mingled manner. An old man who did not dance set the song, and the others danced running, but passing over a very small space of ground, their arms also keeping time, although hardly stirring from their sides. Some few danced apart, but they were all old women and seemed to dance much better than the others. Having danced three sets, each beginning with a speech from the chief and ending with a kind of prayer for our safety, and turning their faces up the river, and quickly lifting their hands high, and striking their palms together, and then letting them fall quickly and bringing them to the same action till the prayer was done. The men are slightly ornamented, but the women more profusely, especially about their hair, and their faces daubed with paint. Some few of them have copper ornaments hanging either to their girdles or the upper part of their petticoat. The women appeared of all sizes, but none corpulent, none handsome. The men, though many are quite ordinary, yet several were well looking and almost all well made, though not stout.—I may here remark that all their dances are a kind of religious prayer for some end. They in their dances never assume a gay, joyous countenance, but always one of serious turn, with often a trait of

enthusiasm. The step must almost always resemble the semblance of running, as if people pursuing and being pursued."

July 6 the party arrived at the Smeethowe [Methow river]. "On our approaching they gave several long thankful OYs. I sent my Simpoil to invite them to smoke. The chief received the message thankfully, and they began to collect a small present; having done which, I again invited them and they came forward and sat down in a ring and began smoking without any ceremony. The women then advanced, all ornamented with fillets and small feathers, dancing in a body to a tune of a mild song which they sang. When close to the men, an old man directed them to sit down all around the men on the outside, with the children, etc. When in place they smoked with the men; only the women were permitted. Women had a single whiff of the calumet, whilst the met took from three to six whiffs. Having smoked awhile, I explained to the chief by means of the Simpoil my intention of going to the sea to open out a road to bring merchandise to trade with them; which they thankfully received and wished a good voyage."

July 7 they saw the Cascade Mountains, as they looked up the Piscous [Wenatchee] valley, and the snow-topped Wenatchee range to the south. That afternoon they were received by the Wenatchee Indians. "They received us all dancing in their huts, one of which was about 209 yards long and the others 20 yards. There were about 120 families. I invited them to smoke and the 5 most respectable men advanced and smoked a few pipes.—They put down their little presents of roots, etc., and then continually kept blessing us and wishing us all manner of good for visiting them, with clapping their hands and extending them to the skies.—A very old respectable man often felt my shoes and legs gently, as if to know whether I was like themselves. A chief of the countries below offered to accompany us, as he understood the language of the people below, which I gladly accepted. We had much trouble to get away, as they very much wished to detain us all night. When we went they all stretched out their hands to Heaven, wishing us a good voyage and a safe return."

July 9 Thompson reached the mouth of the Snake, or Lewis river, and erected a pole with a half sheet of paper on it, claiming the country for Great Britain and declaring the intention of the New Company [Northwesters] to erect a factory there. The chief of the Nez Percés showed a small medal and a small American flag, which he had been given by Lewis and Clark. He was intelligent and friendly; "he ordered all the women to dance, which they did as usual; he gave me two salmon, and I made him a present of two feet of tobacco." Later in the day, the party came in sight of Mt. Hood.

For July 10 Thompson's observations for latitude and longitude are unintelligible; but they probably did not advance very far, as they had a "strong head gale all day; but it increased to a storm; the water swept away like snow." The Indians with whom they spent the night danced "by much the best I have ever seen, all the young of both sexes in two canoes. They made much of this hour. The dance, song, and step were measured by an old chief. Sometimes they sat down at the end. They gently sank down as it were; and rose up as regularly, the whole as usual in grand style." On this day he "heard news of the American ship's arrival."

July 11 records an all day trip with nothing but latitude and longitude, and that imperfectly taken. July 12 they passed the Dalles and the Cascades, and took a few shots without effect at the many grey colored seals. Though the Indians spoke a new and unintelligible language, the chief "jabbered a few words of broken English he had learned from the ships." Here, for the first time, he reports that the Indians, both women and men, are all naked. July 13 he camped "a little above Point Vancouver." July 15, at 1 P. M., he reached Astoria, where the Astorians in their journals give a well known account of his doings for a week.

July 22, at 1:24 P. M., his expedition left Astoria for the return, in company with the Stuart party, destined for the Okonogan. July 24 they reached the mouth of the Willamette; by July 31 they were at the Cascades. At this point Stuart's party lagged behind and Thompson and his men pushed on ahead. The geographic record of his progress has been rubbed out. His descriptions of geological features are preserved in detail. August 6 he reached the forks at Lewis river, and (all other accounts but one to the contrary), went up the Lewis river instead of the Columbia proper. At the forks he dispatched a letter to Finley, at Spokane House, telling him to send and meet him with horses. August 8, he saw the Blue Mountains to the southeast. That night he writes: "Put ashore at the mouth of a small brook [Can the Palouse river be called a small brook?], and camped, as this is the road to my first post on the Spokane lands. Here [on the Lewis river] is a village of fifty men. They danced till they were fairly tired and the chiefs had bawled themselves hoarse. They forced a present of eight horses on me, with a war garment." As there were just eight in his party, this scores once again for the historical generosity of the Nez Percés. With such treatment it is no wonder that Thompson had exclaimed two days before, "Thank Heaven for the favors we find among these numerous people!"

August 13 he writes: "Arrived at Spokane House. Thank God for his mercy to us on this journey. Found all safe; but Joco [Finley] was



with the horses sent to meet me. Late in the evening he arrived." Thompson went immediately down the Spokane and up the Columbia to Kettle Falls, reaching there August 28. One more dash of a few days' duration, from Kettle Falls to Canoe Camp, which he reached at the beginning of October, and Thompson had completed exploring every foot of the Columbia.

In the thirty two months just passed, he had spent barely two months sheltered by a rude hut; the remaining thirty he had lived out; forcing his way with the explorer's hardihood through the New World's greatest mountains and forests; finding the mountain passes, tracing the Pacific slope's greatest river; and (especially by failing to beat Astor's ship to Astoria) making history. Hasn't the failure been emphasized long enough? Shouldn't history now turn its attention to what he accomplished?

Tacoma, December 4, 1912

O. B. SPERLIN.