

WILLIAM WEIR

The subject of this sketch was born in Kentucky, in 1787, of Scotch-Irish parents. He was a very hardy, adventurous spirit, enterprising and aggressive, and left home at about the age of fifteen, going out to seek his fortune. He crossed over into Missouri and entered the employ of the Missouri Fur Company, and in that employ he was regularly trained as a hunter and trapper, and gained the expert knowledge as a woodsman and frontier prospector that enabled him to perform valuable service to the country in exploring the then far off and all but unknown country of the Pacific Northwest. He was continuously in the employ of the Old Missouri Fur Company until upwards of fifteen years had passed by, while the greater part of the continent was an unbroken wilderness, tenanted only by wild beasts and still wilder Indians. He made hunting and trapping his life occupation during the period mentioned, and in the course of his duties went nearly all over the continent, and passed through many thrilling experiences with hostile Indians, dangerous animals, and all perils known to a new and unsettled country. In those days the hunters, trappers and explorers had to literally take their lives in their hands, going far beyond the confines of civilization, depending on the country for their sustenance, and facing perils by night and by day. Mr. Weir, upon three separate occasions in the course of such trips, was the only man escaping with his life out of the party, all the others being killed by the Indians. His life seemed to be charmed. His personal experiences, if narrated simply as they happened, would be as interesting as any of Fennimore Cooper's tales of the Indians and pioneer white people of the Atlantic coast. In 1816 Mr. Weir married and settled on land in what afterwards became Crawford County, Missouri. Even after this he made a trip through Mexico and the wilds of Texas in the interests of his old employers, returning home in 1821, where he died in 1845, after clearing a farm in the wilderness and raising a family of ten children, who became in turn pioneers on the frontiers of the newly developing country of the United States.

The purpose of Mr. Weir's introduction in this connection is to recount briefly his services historically to the country in the early explorations of the old "Oregon Country." He explored its confines four years after the date of the Lewis and Clark expedition, and more than two years before the Astor expedition, which established the trading post at the

mouth of the Columbia river known ever since as "Astoria." The only reason why Mr. Weir's explorations in this northwest were not as prominent as were those of Lewis and Clark was that they came under the auspices of the United States government, with a military escort, while he was in private employ. The facts and date of his coming have been gathered by his grandson, the present writer, and have been verified as to dates from the records of the Missouri State Historical Society.

In 1809, in company with about fifteen other hunters and trappers, all in the employ of the Missouri Fur Company, Mr. Weir went up the Missouri river from St. Louis to its headwaters, crossed the Rocky Mountains, found the headwaters of the Columbia river, and followed them down toward the Pacific Coast, making their winter encampment during the next winter on the Columbia river near the mouth of another river emptying into it. From the description given of these waters and the country generally by Mr. Weir to his descendants afterwards, this encampment must have been just above the mouth of what was afterwards named the Willamette river, and it could not have been far from where the city of Portland, Oregon, now stands. On the way out, the party went through the Mandan Indian country in what is now the Dakotas, where they captured a Mandan chief and took him along with them as a hostage, returning him to his people the following year on their way home. On their way out they cached their furs at intervals on the route, and took them up on their way back.

Mr. Weir always predicted that the Pacific Northwest, the wonderfully rich country through which he passed, would some day develop into a splendid commonwealth to be inhabited by a rich and prosperous people. At the time he was here there was not a white person to be found west of the Rocky Mountains and north of Southern California. It was nearly twenty years before the Hudson Bay traders invaded this country, and about a quarter of a century before the American missionaries and settlers came.

Mr. Weir's expedition is mentioned in Bancroft's History of the Pacific Northwest, but otherwise has never been published. His eldest son, John Weir, emigrated from Missouri to Texas in the "thirties," where he lived when it was a republic under President Sam Houston, and from whence he enlisted in the Texas Mounted Volunteers in the war with Mexico, and fought through that conflict under General W. S. Harney, who was then a colonel, and in the command of General Zach. Taylor; afterward, in 1853, crossing the plains from Texas to California with his family, and in 1858 coming from California to Puget Sound, where he

spent the remaining years of his life, and where his descendants remain. William Weir was a man of great force of character, a noted rifle shot, unlettered and modest, who performed the most heroic duties of frontier life as matters of everyday life without thought of praise or exploitation in history, and he literally knew not the meaning of the word "fear."

ALLEN WEIR.