

DID DANIEL WEBSTER EVER SAY THIS?

[The following article was published in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer March 10, 1907. Since then it has often been sought and is here reproduced for those who failed to save a copy on its first publication.—Editor.]

“What do we want with the vast, worthless area, this region of savages and wild beasts, of deserts, of shifting sands, and whirlwinds of dust, of cactus and prairie dogs? To what use could we ever hope to put these great deserts, or these endless mountain ranges, impenetrable and covered to their base with eternal snow? What can we ever hope to do with the Western coast, a coast three thousand miles, rockbound, cheerless and uninviting and not a harbor on it? What use can we have for such a country? Mr. President, I will never vote one cent from the public treasury to place the Pacific coast one inch nearer to Boston than it is now.”

The recent death of Dr. Henry M. Field, of New York, a member of the distinguished Field family and an editor and writer of note, calls again to mind the query whether Daniel Webster ever used the language of the above quotation which appears on page 173 of Dr. Field's book entitled, “Our Western Archipelago.” The same quotation is given upon pages 518-19 of H. H. Bancroft's “Chronicles of the Builders.” In both books the statement is made that a bill was pending before congress for the establishment of a post road from the west line of Missouri to the Pacific ocean, and that upon the floor of the senate Mr. Webster broke out as follows; and Mr. Field gives the year of this speech as 1844.

Some interesting information as to how Mr. Field came to use this alleged quotation is given in some memoranda of the late Prof. William I. Marshall, of Chicago, from which the writer is privileged to copy. Mr. Marshall's notes read: “I have received a letter from Rev. H. M. Field, who says his only authority is a letter from some one whose name he has forgotten. P. S.—A later letter from Dr. Field gives one George L. Chase, of Hartford, Conn., as his authority, November 16, 1896. I have received a letter from Mr. George L. Chase, of Hartford, Conn, stating that he sent the quotation to Dr. Field without in any manner indorsing it (as it seemed to him very unlike Webster's style), but only to get Dr. Field's opinion on its authenticity and with no expectation that Dr. Field would publish it.”

The late Rev. Myron Eells of Twana, Wash., used this same quo-

tation in almost the same words as given herein in his "Reply to Bourne," page 82, published by Whitman College in 1902, but with this footnote: "The writer cannot give the book and page where this is to be found. It is a part of a reply of Mrs. C. S. Pringle to Mrs. F. F. Victor's attack on Dr. Whitman, written December 1, 1884, which the writer has in manuscript." Mrs. Pringle is an elderly lady reported as now living near or in Spokane, Wash.; she is one of the survivors of the Whitman massacre. Her authority for the speech is not known even to her, according to Mr. Eells, who knew her well and questioned her about it. In another connection Mr. Chase is reported to have said that he read the article containing the speech while upon a journey to the Pacific coast and there is a possibility that it is Mrs. Pringle's article that he sent to Dr. Field. It is even possible that Mr. Bancroft took it from Mrs. Pringle; the "Chronicles of the Builders" was copyrighted in 1890 and published at San Francisco in 1891, and "Our Western Archipelago" was published for the first time by Scribner's in 1895.

It would be interesting to mention the further use that has been freely made of this quotation is post-prandial efforts, in addresses before college students and Sunday school scholars, in newspaper discussions and even in books that claim to be histories as illustrating the ignorance and intolerance of Eastern statesmen to the physical and political value and character of the Pacific Northwest during the early '40s, and the indifference of Mr. Webster at the time he negotiated the Ashburton treaty and in later years; but such mention might be taken in the light of controversy. Suffice it to say that there seems to be no reason to believe that Mr. Webster ever used such language, and readers of Northwest history have known this for some years.

Mr. Webster was a member of the senate from 1828 until February 22, 1841, when he resigned to become secretary of state under the Harrison administration. He continued in the same office under President Tyler until May 8, 1843, when he resigned, and again returned to the senate in March, 1845, as the successor of Mr. Choate.

Mr. Webster was a member of the cabinet of President Tyler and was engaged in negotiations with Lord Ashburton in 1842 when Lieut. Charles Wilkes, of the United States navy, filed his official report of the official exploring voyage made under his command, which included a very extensive examination of the Puget Sound and Columbia River waters and the countries adjacent thereto and of the coast of California; and of San Francisco Lieut. Wilkes reported there to be "one of the finest, if not the very best harbor in all the world." In view of this

circumstance alone it is not probable that Mr. Webster ever said what this quotation reports him as saying.

Mr. Webster was a man of very dignified bearing and speech and the style of this quotation does not compare at all with his common form of expression. Further than that, the speeches of Mr. Webster upon the floor of the senate are a matter of record in the Congressional Globe and Debates in Congress and a careful search has been made for this speech, and it has not been found, and scarcely anything by him that can be called disparagement of the Pacific Coast has been found. The first bill to establish post roads from the western line of the state of Missouri to the mouth of the Columbia River originated in the committee of the senate on postoffices and post roads, and was introduced in the senate on March 2, 1846, and no such speech by Mr. Webster has been found in connection with that bill.

Our query is of small importance in itself, but it has a bearing upon Northwest history as against the theory that the Oregon country or Columbia River country, as it was originally called, was saved to the United States by any one person or by any one event; particularly because students of the diplomatic side of our history are saying more and more that the term "Saved Oregon" is an erroneous one. Daniel Webster was a very important factor in the negotiation of the treaties which settled our Northeastern and Northwestern boundaries with England; more influential than either President Tyler or President Polk in that particular issue. The Ashburton treaty was distinctly Webster's own, and in 1846 Mr. Webster was in the senate when President Polk referred the question to that body before he undertook to negotiate finally the Treaty of Washington. Henry Cabot Lodge, a scholar and himself a writer of history, in his biography of Mr. Webster (*Amer. Statesman series*, Vol. 21, page 257-8), says: "In regard to the Northwestern boundary, Mr. Webster agreed with the opinion of Mr. Monroe's cabinet that the forty-ninth parallel was a fair and proper line." And historians generally agree with him. Some of the direct relations of Mr. Webster with this question may be mentioned in a subsequent paper."

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