

## NOTES ON THE LIFE AND HISTORICAL SERVICES OF THOMAS W. PROSCH

Among the pioneers of Puget Sound, the Prosch family occupies a secure and honored position. From the Bagleys, Bells, and Borens down to Yesler in the alphabet, no name brings to mind longer service or higher esteem. Charles Prosch,<sup>1</sup> the founder of the Western branch of this family, came to Washington Territory in 1858, bringing his wife and three boys: James Wiley, Frederick, and Thomas Wickham.<sup>2</sup> A printer by trade, he at once established the *Puget Sound Herald*<sup>3</sup> at Steilacoom and conducted it there as a high grade weekly newspaper from March 12, 1858, to June 11, 1863.

Judged by present standards, the publication of a journal of this character in so sparsely settled a community was a remarkable achievement. When this paper was established there were but four towns on Puget Sound; Port Townsend, with a white population of about fifty people; Seattle, with about one hundred; Steilacoom, with perhaps one hundred fifty; and Olympia, the Capital of the Territory, with possibly two hundred. There were but a few thousand persons in all Western Washington.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the limited patronage that could be hoped for the new enterprise, the paper prospered and proved a worthy rival to the *Pioneer and Democrat*, the only other newspaper in the Territory at the time of its launching. Fortune was at first favorable. The Fraser River gold discoveries brought thousands of people from Oregon and California in the Spring, Summer and Fall of 1858. Times were prosperous and the number of permanent settlers had doubled by 1860. Rival newspapers sprang up, however, and the Civil War soon brought on serious financial conditions. The continuation of the paper was made possible only by the assistance of the sons, all of whom worked in the printing office. The newspaper was a family industry and succeeded where modern methods of specialization would surely have failed.

1 Charles Prosch was born in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, in 1820. His father was of Hanoverian stock and his mother a native of Thuringen. Charles was educated at St. John's College, an Episcopal Church school. He learned the printer's trade in the office of the *New York Express*. He came to California in 1853 and worked on the *Alta California* until 1858, when he left for Washington Territory.

2 These youngsters were respectively eleven, nine and seven years of age. Thomas was born in Brooklyn, N. Y., June 2, 1850.

3 The complete set preserved by the Prosch family is on file in the University of Washington Library. Another set nearly complete is in the Provincial Library, Victoria, British Columbia.

4 Charles Prosch in *Reminiscences of Washington Territory*, p. 42, makes estimate of 5,000, but on p. 47, gives 3,000 persons as the approximation. See also T. W. Prosch, *The Conkling-Prosch Family*, p. 95.

On a favorable opportunity in 1864, the *Herald* was sold and the proceeds invested in merchandise for a general store which was opened in the room formerly occupied by the printing office. This venture was at first highly successful but over-confidence and a too ready extension of credit brought on its termination in the second year.

In January of 1867, Mr. Prosch took over a logging camp which had been abandoned by four men whom he had set up in business. With the help of the two boys,<sup>5</sup> he was just able to make expenses for the following ten months. In November he bought out the *Pacific Tribune* of Olympia and moved to the Capital. He secured appointment as Public Printer and began legislative and commercial printing in December of that year. Public printing proved a severe disappointment. He realized far less than he had anticipated, due in part to payments in depreciated currency.

During the legislative session of 1867-68, he ran *The Daily Pacific Tribune*, a small evening paper, the first daily newspaper of Olympia. In 1869, he resumed the daily edition of the *Tribune* and continued to publish it for several years. In 1872, the Prosch newspaper plant was forced to the wall and sold at sheriff's sale. Mr. Thomas W. Prosch, the youngest son, by money which he had elsewhere earned and saved was able to buy in the business and save the day.

As proprietor, he continued the *Tribune* in Olympia until June, 1873, when Tacoma was announced as the terminus of the approaching Northern Pacific Railroad. No time was lost in moving to the new village which seemed destined to become the metropolis. Daily and evening editions of the *Tribune* were here published from August, 1873, to June, 1875. The financial crash of 1873, however, followed by the failure of Jay Cooke, caused great hardship to all business in Tacoma. After a two years' struggle in this city, Mr. Prosch picked up his newspaper and moved to Seattle, which then appeared to be the most promising town.

Seventeen years of residence in three towns, each in turn expected to outrival its neighbors, brought the Prosch family at last to the goal of their ambition. The days of hardship were not yet over but Seattle proved to be the leading town and conditions gradually improved. The foundations of future success were securely established. The resourcefulness that had enabled them to withstand the lean years was rewarded by years of plenty.

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<sup>5</sup> The oldest son, James Wiley Prosch, died in 1860 of what is now known as appendicitis.

The main facts in the life of Thomas W. Prosch are matters of record.<sup>6</sup> He took his place in his father's printing office at nine, was a salesman in a general store at fifteen, hand in a logging camp at seventeen, legislative clerk at nineteen, customs clerk at twenty. In the intervals, he worked at the printer's trade. In 1872, at the age of twenty-two, he became the owner of the *Pacific Tribune* and for the next fourteen years he followed all the ins and outs of the newspaper business in the towns of Olympia, Tacoma and Seattle.

The *Tribune* was moved to Tacoma in 1873, to Seattle in 1875, and was discontinued in 1878. In 1879, Prosch and Crawford bought the *Intelligencer*. In 1881, Prosch, Leary and Harris established the *Post-Intelligencer*, Mr. Prosch owning one-half interest. In 1884 he became sole owner, and in 1886, he sold the paper<sup>7</sup>, and retired from active journalistic work.

Mr. Prosch was a prime mover in Seattle civic affairs. He was postmaster from 1876 to 1878, member of the school board from 1891-1893. In 1894-1895, he was one of three men who platted and appraised the tide lands fronting Seattle, Ballard and Tacoma. He was an active member of the Chamber of Commerce, being for three years its secretary and for fourteen years a trustee.

The recital of these facts gives some idea of his versatility and of his ability to succeed. He was married in 1877 to Virginia McCarver, the daughter of General Morton M. McCarver, an immigrant of 1843, prominent in the development of four states, Iowa, California, Oregon and Washington. To this fine heritage six children were born<sup>8</sup> and Mr. Prosch proved a most devoted and loyal parent. He was an active worker in the church and while never an office seeker, he was in politics a strong party man and firm Republican.

Physically, Mr. Prosch was not robust, but as a result of careful and abstemious living he was always well. In carriage, he was erect and proud. An apparent stiffness in bearing was due to extreme nearsightedness. This handicap prevented his taking part in athletic games and effectually checkmated his boyish ambition for the course at West Point. He resembled his mother in

<sup>6</sup> Consult C. B. Bagley, *History of Seattle*, 2:836-837; also Mr. Prosch's own account in *The Conkling-Prosch Family*.

<sup>7</sup> The partners of Mr. Prosch mentioned in this paragraph were Samuel L. Crawford, John Leary, and George W. Harris. Documents showing ownership and management of the *Post-Intelligencer* in the eighties are on file in the University of Washington Library.

<sup>8</sup> Two daughters are living: Edith Gratia Prosch of Sierra Madre, California, and Phoebe, now Mrs. August W. Anderson, of Seattle. The son, Arthur Morton Prosch, resides in Seattle, Washington.

dark skin and brown eyes. His countenance was singularly open and manifested great candor and sincerity.

His educational opportunities were limited to the village schools of the time. His instincts were scholarly and he was a life long student of those subjects that interested him. He had a fine memory for names and dates. He excelled in penmanship and furnished "copy" that was a delight to compositors.

During the later years of his life, he became deeply interested in historical matters. He was one of the leading supporters of the Washington Pioneer Association and other historical societies. When the *Washington Historical Quarterly* was started, Mr. Prosch became a Contributing Editor and nearly every number until the time of his death contains evidence of his helpfulness. The writer remembers most clearly his first visit at which time he held out a crisp ten dollar bill, saying: "This will pay my subscription for some years in advance. Let me know when that is gone." On numerous occasions he called with documents or articles to submit, and his attitude was always one of inquiry as to what service he could render.

Writing and book collecting were destined to become his most enduring work, but his life was cut short when this service was but fairly begun.<sup>9</sup> Only students acquainted with his published and unpublished work can fully appreciate the public loss in his untimely death.

As a writer Mr. Prosch aimed at clearness rather than literary effect. He had a scrupulous regard for accuracy and few workers in the field of Pacific Northwest history have labored with equal care and conscience. He liked a good story, nevertheless, and has enlivened his pages with not a few anecdotes of the first settlers.

His book collecting was dominated by the wish to know and preserve the essential facts of history as they were related to his own life: his family, his friends, his town, and the Northwest. He collected with great industry the essential needs of the student, whether manuscripts, photographs, newspapers, pamphlets or books. He had no interest in books as pieces of merchandise and no sympathy with the man who speculates in rare volumes. Although he began late, he had at the time of his death one of the best private collections in its field.

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<sup>9</sup> On the evening of March 30, 1915, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas W. Prosch, Margaret Lenora Denny, and Mrs. Harriet Foster Beecher were plunged to death in the Duwamish River. The closed automobile in which they were riding skidded and broke through the railing of the bridge at Allentown on the road from Tacoma to Seattle. An account of the accident is to be found in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* of March 31 and April 1, 1915. See also the *Washington Historical Quarterly* 6:136-138, April, 1915.

The estate was administered by his daughter, Edith G. Prosch, and thanks to her judgment and foresight the historical material was not allowed to become dissipated. Instead, opportunity was given to important local libraries<sup>10</sup> to add the material most needed and most appropriate to the several collections.

The published works of Thomas W. Prosch include the following titles:

1. *The Complete Chinook Jargon, or Indian Trade Language of Oregon, Washington, British Columbia, Alaska, Idaho, and Other Parts of the North Pacific Coast.* (Seattle: G. Davies and Company, 1888. Pp. 40.)

2. *David S. Maynard and Catherine T. Maynard.* (Seattle: Lowman and Hanford, 1906. Pp. 83.)

3. *McCarver and Tacoma.* (Seattle: Lowman and Hanford, 1906. Pp. 198. Illustrations; two portraits.)

4. *The Conkling-Prosch Family.* (Seattle: For the Author by the General Printing and Lithographing Company. Pp. 141. Illustrations.)

Of the first item, no copy apparently is extant in the Northwest. Most of the copies were destroyed in the Seattle fire of 1889. The above description is taken from Pilling's *Bibliography of the Chinookan Languages*, pages 60-61. Mr. Prosch revised and enlarged his work for republication and apparently did not wish to preserve the first printing. Manuscript printer's copy of the revised edition is preserved in the University of Washington Library.

The Maynard volume is based on the diary of Dr. David S. Maynard and recounts the experiences of a physician in crossing the Plains to Oregon in 1850. It records important events in the early history of Seattle. In *McCarver and Tacoma*, the main theme is biographical and relates to the events in the lives of the father and mother of the author's wife. It gives data on the founding of the city of Tacoma. The story of *The Conkling-Prosch Family* was prepared for the author's immediate relatives and friends and was issued in an edition of 150 copies. It is valuable as giving the part which the Prosches have taken in the development of the Puget Sound Country.

Mr. Prosch was a frequent contributor to newspapers and

<sup>10</sup> The newspapers, including the family files of *The Puget Sound Herald* and *The Pacific Tribune* were the first items disposed of, these going to the University of Washington Library. Mr. C. B. Bagley was given next opportunity to secure books for his private library. After that the remaining books were sold to Mr. E. O. S. Scholefield, representing the Provincial Library of British Columbia, and Mr. George W. Soliday, a private collector of Seattle. Finally the letters, documents, scrapbooks, albums, and miscellaneous material were deposited in the archives of the University of Washington Library.

magazines. Numerous historical articles are to be found in various periodicals.

Of unpublished works, the following items are most noteworthy:

1. *The Chinook Jargon or Indian Trade Language of Alaska, British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Other Parts of the Northwest Coast, with Examples of Speech, Illustrations, Historical Notes and General Information.* Pp. 115, on paper 8x10 inches.

2. [*Record Book of Anecdotes and Incidents.*] Pp. 236.

3. *Chronological History of Seattle and Puget Sound, 1850-1897.* Pp. 432, on paper 8x14 inches.

The *Chinook Jargon Dictionary* was planned for private distribution in an edition of 500 copies. No plans had apparently been formulated for the publication of the other two items. The *Record Book* contains much material which might have been drawn upon for subsequent volumes. The *Chronological History* would probably have been thoroughly revised and later printed. As it stands it is an important contribution.<sup>11</sup>

Among the unique treasures of the library of Thomas W. Prosch were many manuscript letters and documents. There were a half dozen albums of historical photographs, carefully identified, located and explained. A series of scrapbooks contained further data of value. One of these contains the original letters and telegrams relating to the Seattle Fire Relief of 1889. This large volume gives a practically complete official record of the aid received and the disbursements made by the Committee in charge. Another book is wholly devoted to the history of the Seattle Totem Pole, while a third relates to the Washington Mill Company and its important business relations for thirty years on Hood Canal.

Bound volumes of pamphlets on specific subjects added greatly to the working value of his collection. Several of these relate to the coming of the railways, two are devoted to military affairs on Puget Sound, others tell the story of the Hudson's Bay Company. Their value lies in the fact that each volume represents years of collection from far and wide and that here are brought conveniently together fundamental sources, some of which have now become practically unobtainable. By frequent notes of cor-

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<sup>11</sup> Manuscripts of the three items just cited are in the University of Washington Library. A typed working copy of the *Chronological History* is there available and is also to be found in the Seattle Public Library and in the private library of Mr. George W. Soliday of Seattle.

rection, criticism, and explanation, Mr. Prosch put the stamp of his personality upon the material in his library and thus added greatly to its working value. All of the material above described is now the property of the University of Washington Library.

Makers are not usually the recorders of history. Pioneers as a rule lack leisure as well as perspective. Thomas Wickham Prosch was a marked exception to this rule. His active life saw the development of a metropolis from a crude settlement to a modern city. With middle age he had acquired a well earned leisure and had the instinct and capacity for historical narrative. At his death at the age of sixty-four, he had laid the foundation for much promising historical work. His father had died less than two years previous in his ninety-fourth year and there was every reason to expect many years of productive labor from the youngest son. This, however, was not to be. Though his work was cut short in the midst of his greatest activity, he had already accomplished much of high and enduring value. Subsequent historians in the Pacific Northwest will yield grateful recognition to this industrious and painstaking workman.

CHARLES W. SMITH.