

"DOCTOR" ROBERT NEWELL, MOUNTAIN MAN*

This annual occasion at Champoeg is unusually appropriate in its setting. If the gifted Elbertus Hubbard was alive and present he might make place among his classics for *A Little Journey to the Home of Robert Newell*. For this memorial building stands close to the boundary line of the donation land claim of Robert (and Rebecca) Newell. Here, in 1844, Newell selected about six hundred and forty acres of land for a permanent American home. Here, later, he caused the townsite of Champoeg to be platted and initiated American business in river transportation, warehousing, merchandising and milling; American in distinction from that of the Hudson's Bay Company already established. On rising ground near the highway, a little distance to the east, still stands, we are told, the old Newell residence, where during the terrible flood of December, 1861, Newell harbored and fed so many of his neighbors, who had been driven from their homes by the rising waters of the Willamette. Arriving on Tualatin Plains in 1840 Newell was active in the preliminaries as well as the actual formation of the Provisional Government, and was chosen to its legislature at practically every election prior to the organization of the Territory by Governor Lane. To this active participant in that active scene of May 2nd, 1843 is given the honor, long since due, of special mention today.

In December, 1845, the Legislature of the Provisional Government met at Oregon City, and selected Robert Newell as Speaker, an office he held at other sessions also. The minutes contain the following communication:

"Gentlemen: Having received information of my wife being very ill, I am compelled to request of your honorable body immediate leave of absence, and by granting this you will confer a favor upon your very humble and obedient servant. Robert Newell."

This is our record of the marital faithfulness of Newell. Somewhere near here lie the ashes of that good woman, who accompanied him to this Willamette environment, not from Missouri or Ohio but from the mountains of Idaho, then Oregon; a full-blooded Nez Perce woman, if you please. Before coming to the Willamette, Newell had spent eleven years of joyous

* Remarks at Champoeg, Oregon, May 7th, 1927.

adventure, danger and service as an American trapper and fur trader west of the Rocky Mountains, and it was the need and custom of the fur traders, both British and American, to establish honorable family relations with the Indians. Four of the children born to Newell by this wife are said to have borne the names of Thomas Jefferson, Stephen Douglas, Francis Ermatinger and Marcus Whitman, names suggestive of the politics and friendships of the father. During the year after her death, Newell married again, this time Miss Rebecca Newman of Champoeg county, by whom eight children were born. This will indicate that he was a firm believer in the Scriptural injunction to increase and multiply, and contributed a full quota to the population of the new territory.

Robert Newell was a Mountain Man, a term indicative of unusual courage, endurance, sagacity and, in the case of Newell, horse-sense. The great majority of the pioneers arrived in Oregon by the ships of the plains, now called the covered wagon, but some came in ships of the sea and by the Isthmus, and still others by saddle and pack animals. The latter, not a numerous group, were the Mountain Men, already inured to hardship and danger amid the vicissitudes of the fur trade, and particularly ready for the roughness of pioneer living. Reckless, dissipated, illiterate? No! Squaw men in any odious sense of the word? No! Teetotalers? No! One hundred per cent Americans? Yes! Among them were Joseph Gale, Joseph L. Meek, George Ebberts, John Larrison, William Doughty and Caleb Wilkins, but the most influential, if we read history aright, was Robert Newell, nicknamed and familiarly known as Doctor Newell, although neither a physician nor a druggist's clerk (the title of doctor was very loosely applied in pioneer days).

"Mountain Men" seems to have been a term distinctive to Oregon. It was not common along the Missouri frontier and was not used in Canada. Irving, Coues and Chittenden do not use it, and further search for its origin would be interesting, but, probably, like Topsy, it "just grewed." It was applied to the men who quit service with the fur companies and established homes on the Columbia river and its tributaries, particularly in the Willamette Valley.

What there was in that mountain life and environment to prepare a man like Newell for leadership on the Willamette we can not here inquire. Back of it, of course, was the home training, which in those days was more rigorous and permanent

than it is now. Most of these Mountain Men of Oregon were not frontiersmen, adventurers or mere hunters and Indian fighters, but came from pioneer stock of New England, Virginia, or the Middle West. Newell came from Ohio, was educated in the schools and by God-fearing parents, and remained at home until past his age of majority. It speaks well for the entire group that they emerged from that wild, restless and reckless career in the mountains with stability of character to settle and remain on the Willamette.

Newell's first employment (1828) was with the Rocky Mountain Fur Company; the Sublettes, Jedediah Smith, David Jackson and others, early users of South Pass and explorers of Bear River, Great Salt Lake, and the Upper Snake River Country. Jedediah Smith was a unique character, a Christian fur trader. He had just then returned from his Oregon experiences, on the Umpqua and at Fort Vancouver, and was telling the story of his fair treatment by Doctor McLoughlin and the Hudson's Bay Company. Quite likely he was the leader after whom Newell patterned in some respects. The American proprietors were known in the mountains as "bushways" (or bushaways), a derisive corruption of the name bourgeois in use by the Hudson's Bay Company. Newell himself in time became to be known as a bushway, in recognition of his good judgment and fair dealing.

Those were the years of that picturesque scene, the annual rendezvous each summer, usually at some meadow in the vicinity of Green River, two weeks or more spent in conference, balancing of accounts, and trading by the proprietors, and in sports and dissipation by the large majority of reckless trappers and servants. Americans, British and friendly Indians all gathered at rendezvous, and thus came the opportunity for acquaintance and standing with the traders of the Hudson's Bay Company, which became of permanent value to the Mountain Men after arrival on the Willamette. This became especially true in that it served as an introduction to the early residence of French Prairie, some of whom had been similarly employed, and nearly all of whom had native wives.

At rendezvous during these years Newell witnessed the passage of Nathaniel Wyeth, both going and returning, of Captain Bonneville, of Major Pilcher, of the missionaries, scientists and travelers and of Jason Lee returning to the States in 1838. He was among those who welcomed the first white women crossing the plains and mountains. He heard echoes of the wild talk at

St. Louis about sending an armed force to drive out the Hudson's Bay Company. He was an early visitor at Fort Hall, and began to visualize the dust and the rumble of the future wagon trains along the Oregon Trail. Being a man of action as well as vision he determined to transfer his career from the shadows of the Three Tetons to those of the peaks of the Cascades. As necessary equipment for pioneer life he acquired in 1839 from an exhausted party of missionaries three wagons at Fort Hall, and in 1840, with Jos. Meek, Caleb Wilkins and Francis Ermatinger as companions and helpers, drove through to the Columbia; the first wagons to break the sage of the plains of Idaho and be dragged over the steep slopes of the Blue Mountains. Incidentally, Ermatinger was the ranking trader of the Hudson's Bay Company in the Snake River Country.

Upon Newell's twenty years of almost continuous residence on the Willamette it is not possible to dwell now;¹ it is sufficient to say that he entered vigorously into the affairs of the growing colony and Territory, was active in many private and public enterprises, and was widely known as a good citizen. The geniality and generousness of his disposition prevented the accumulation of much wealth, and when, in 1861, a terrible flood inundated the Willamette Valley, as is now happening in the Mississippi Valley, his mill and warehouse at Champoeg were swept away and his business destroyed.

Leaving his family here, he joined the rush of gold seekers to the Idaho mines, which had just been discovered. In that region he at once became the confident of his old friends, the Nez Perces, and was called upon to assist in the completion of the treaties that were so necessary to establish the legal relationship between the Indians and the whites. In the treaty of 1863, the Nez Perces insisted upon a provision that a tract of five acres of land at the confluence of the Snake and Clearwater rivers, said to have been the site of an old, Indian burying ground, be conveyed to their friend, "Doctor" Newell. This was agreed to, and the Lewis and Clark Hotel at Lewiston, Idaho, now stands upon that part of those five acres upon which Newell's house had been and where he died in 1869.

In the Bancroft Collection at Berkeley, California, is a manuscript signed by Jesse Applegate, one of the most prominent of Oregon pioneers, containing the following estimate of Robert Newell:

¹ For sketch of Newell's career see *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, Vol. IX, No. 2.

"Though Newell came to the mountains from the state of Ohio in his youth, he brought with him to his wild life some of the fruits of early culture, which he always retained. Though brave among the bravest, he never made a reckless display of that quality, and in battlefields, as in councils, his conduct was always marked by prudence and good sense. Though fond of mirth and jollity and the life of social reunions, he never degenerated from the instincts of a gentleman. Though his love of country amounted to passion and his mountain life was spent in opposition and rivalry to the Hudson's Bay Company, he never permitted his prejudices to blind his judgment or by word or act to do an injustice to an adversary. Of undoubted truth and honor, he was the unquestioned leader and adviser of men of his class, both British and American, and enjoyed to a great extent the confidence of all parties in the country. His influence in the early days was therefore great, and both in public and private affairs he was frequently called upon to exert it. It is enough to say in his praise that it was always exerted for good."

F. X. Matthieu, another honored pioneer well known in history, present and voting on May 2, 1843, had this to say about Newell, in later years: "Newell stood head and shoulders above all the other mountain men in his knowledge of government and in the methods necessary to be employed in the organizing of government; in fact, he was something of a statesman."

We now revert to the scene of May 2nd, 1843, which this occasion commemorates. Visualize, please, that restless assemblage of about one hundred men, their horses hobbled or tied to trees or their canoes pulled upon the banks; the final division here in the open after futile votes by acclamation and show of hands in the little warehouse or granary that was too small to accommodate them; for the proceedings were in due parliamentary order. Consider that this was not a sudden and unintelligent gathering, but a climax of what had been on the minds of the settlers and under public discussion for months, and that the larger population, residing on French Prairie, near by, had already presented their views in writing at a previous meeting in March, favoring rules and regulations but not the republic. Jason Lee was not here. Dr. John McLoughlin was not here. No numerical record of the vote was inscribed at the time, but memory (of Newell and others) and tradition relate that decision rested on not more than five votes, those of the Mountain Men or of as many more Canadian settlers of independent minds. Of those

groups the natural and logical leader was forceful Robert Newell, "whose love of country amounted to a passion", and in whose judgment they had confidence.

Were there heroics in the form of banter and challenge? Maybe so, but decision did not rest on such. The daring boastful and picturesque Joseph Meek has handed down one of these; also another to the effect that "when he came to the country Mount Hood was a hole in the ground". Every historian knows of the ease of exaggeration by Joseph Meek. Newell and Meek were trappers in the mountains together in 1829, had started life, escapes and privations and were lifelong friends, but Newell's was the deciding mind of the two, as well as of some of the Canadian settlers. Boston, every spring, celebrates the birth of organized liberty along the Atlantic by the reenactment of Paul Revere's ride, while in Oregon we review the birth of organized Americanism along the Pacific by repeating Joseph Meek's vociferous "Who's for a divide?" Both are tales based on actual historic achievement. Although not literally true they serve to inspire patriotism in our children. We would not suppress them, but should understand and recognize their place.

While this scene at Champoeg was in progress the large migration of 1843 was starting to cross the plains of Kansas and Nebraska. One of their number was J. W. Nesmith, an ambitious young man without family responsibilities, en route to establish an American residence in Oregon. Eighteen years later this man became one of the United States Senators from Oregon, with the help, incidentally, of Newell's vote in the Legislature. Newell and Nesmith were warm friends, and there can be no finer conclusion to these brief remarks than Nesmith's words at a pioneer gathering many years ago. He said:

"Genial, kindhearted Newell! How many of you recollect his good qualities and how heartily have you laughed around the campfire at his favorite song 'Love and Sassingers'! I can yet hear the lugubrious refrain describing how his Dulcinea was captured by the butcher's boy—

'And there sat faithless she,
a frying Sassingers for he.

He has folded his robes about him and laid himself down to rest among the mountains he loved so well, and which so often have echoed the merry tones of his voice."

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