

## ARCHIBALD PELTON, THE FIRST FOLLOWER OF LEWIS AND CLARK

There is a tragic story of the first white man to follow the wilderness trail of the great explorers, a story which began at West Farms Township in Northampton, Massachusetts, when the eldest son of David Pelton disappeared from home and was never again heard from. This was all that was known to J. M. Pelton, author of the *Genealogy of the Pelton Family in America*, published at Albany, N. Y. in 1892.

He records how David Pelton, the son of Reuben, the son of Henry, the son of Samuel, the son of John, of Groveton, Connecticut, married Hannah Milliken of Block Island, Massachusetts, and lived at West Farms, and that he was a farmer. His eldest son was Archibald Pelton, who appears to have been born about 1792, since the third child was born in 1796, but instead of the usual list of descendants which ordinarily follow the names, there is merely the note that of Archibald there is no record, "is said to have left home young and that he was not heard from afterwards."

There may be some mention of his name in the records of the early fur trade on the Missouri prior to 1811 when Donald M'Kenzie with the detachment from the Hunt overland party to Astoria found him with the Indians somewhere in the vicinity of what is now Lewiston, Idaho. Franchere in his *Narrative* states that "They also encountered, in these parts, a young American, who was deranged, but who sometimes recovered his reason. This young man told them, in one of his lucid intervals, that he was from Connecticut, and was named Archibald Pelton; that he had come up the Missouri with Mr. [Andrew] Henry; that all the people at the post established by that trader were massacred by the Blackfeet; that he alone escaped, and had been wandering for three years with the Snake Indians. Our people took this young man with them" [to Astoria] (Franchere's *Narrative*, p. 150).

Ross Cox, in *Adventures on the Columbia River*, Vol. I, p. 91, Edition 1831, gives a similar account, but calling him "Petton" that "having escaped unperceived, he wandered about for several weeks until he met the friendly tribe with whom we found him. The dreadful scenes he had witnessed, joined to the sufferings he had gone through, produced partial derangement of his intel-

lect. His disorder was of a harmless nature, and as it appeared that civilized companionship would in the course of time restore him to his reason, Mr. M'Kenzie very humanely brought him along with the party."

His arrival at Astoria in January, 1812, made him the first white man to follow the footsteps of Lewis and Clark, although others had reached Astoria by way of the Athabasca route.

His unfortunate affliction appears to have greatly impressed the Indians, since his name was used to indicate mental derangement, and so became a word in the Chinook jargon; but there is no further mention of him by the various writers of early Astoria, except in the *Journal of Alexander Henry*, Vol. II, page 868, where is called "Joseph Pelton" and, according to the notes by Coues, page 867, was described by Henry as an idiot. He was one of the fifty men who remained at Astoria in April, 1814, when the great brigade started up the Columbia with the returning Astorians.

It is possible that he was the youth called Judge of whom Ross Cox writes in Volume II, page 291 (edition 1831) about the end of May of that year. "About two miles at the rear of the fort [Astoria], on the Clatsop River, a place had been established for making charcoal. One of the men employed at the business was a poor half-witted American from Boston, named Judge, who had crossed the continent with Mr. Hunt's party, and whose sufferings during that journey had partially deranged his intellect. He was however a capital woodsman; and few men could compete with him, as he said himself, in hewing down forests "by the acre." His comrade had been absent one day selecting proper wood for charcoal, and on returning to the lodge in the evening he found the body of the unfortunate Judge lying stretched on the ground, with his skull completely cleft in two by the blow of an axe which was lying beside him steeped in blood. He instantly repaired to the fort, and communicated the dreadful intelligence; upon which a party was despatched for the mangled remains of poor Judge," who is described as "the most harmless individual belonging to our establishment."

It was subsequently discovered that the murderer was a Tillamook Indian who had received an injury from a white man whom he had erroneously taken to be poor Judge, and with his companion "had determined to wreak their vengeance upon him. For this purpose they had been, for nearly two years occasionally lurking about the fort, until the fatal opportunity presented itself

of gratifying their demoniacal passion. On the day of the murder, after Judge's comrade had quitted the lodge, they stole unperceived on him, and while he was engaged at the fire they felled him with a blow of his own axe, after which they split his skull, and made their escape."

It is a matter of especial interest that the trial of the two murderers was the first ever held in Oregon, and that the "jury was composed of the gentlemen belonging to the [Northwest] Company, with an equal number of Indians, consisting of chiefs and chieftainesses, for among these [Chinookan] tribes the old women possess great authority."

The few glimpses we have of that poor boy's life draw a picture in dark shades of one of the many tragedies of early Oregon.

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