

PICKERING'S JOURNEY TO FORT COLVILLE IN 1841

Among the members of the party which crossed the Cascades to Fort Colville, under the command of Lieutenant Johnson, of the famous Wilkes Exploring Expedition of 1841, was Dr. Charles Pickering. He was born at Starucca Creek, Pennsylvania in 1805, and graduated at Harvard in 1823, and at the Medical School in 1826. He was a practicing physician until appointed in 1838 to accompany the Exploring Expedition as a naturalist. In 1848 he published *The Races of Man and their Geographical Distribution*. In this, under the heading of Mongolian Races; he gives an interesting account of the journey to Fort Colville, which should be compared with that in the Wilkes Narrative. (Edition 1849, Vol. IV. page 379 etc).* This is contributed in the hope that it may be of value to such students of Washington history as may not have access to the valuable work of Dr. Pickering; the extracts being taken from the edition of 1872, pages 21-31.

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Interior Oregon by Dr. Charles Pickering

Preparations for a journey into the interior having been completed, our party, under the charge of Lieutenant Johnson, left the head of Puget Sound, on the 20th of May 1841. The natives selected to accompany us, chiefly belonged to the Nisqualli tribe, a portion of which encamped in the neighborhood of the fort; and we obtained the assistance of two Canadian interpreters. . . . The country near the coast was interspersed with flowery prairies, and afforded some game, chiefly deer; but as we approached the mountains, the woods became continuous. In all this distance we saw no villages, and but three or four habitations; and these, with one exception, appeared to be deserted. Three or four individuals were fallen in with on the way, and they were persuaded to join our party. After some days, our natives became as jovial among

*The record by Lieutenant Robert E. Johnson in the 1845 edition of the Wilkes Expedition Narrative, Volume IV., pages 418-429 and 468-470, was reproduced in Edmond S. Meany's *Mount Rainier a Record of Exploration*, pages 13 to 33. In 1925-1926 the private *Diary* of Charles Wilkes was published in the *Washington Historical Quarterly* and was later reprinted in pamphlet form. There may be found references to this Johnson journey under entries for May 15, 17, 18 and 19, and July 16 and 17, where is recorded his suspension from duty. *Races of Men*, by Dr. Charles Pickering, was published first in 1848 as one of the monographs in the report of the United States (Wilkes) Exploring Expedition. Only 100 sets were issued and the originals are not easy of access. As Mr. Barry states, he has used a later edition of the monograph.—EDITOR.

themselves as so many Polynesians, and I once heard one of them humming a low plaintive tune. They combed their hair with a pronged stick somewhat resembling a clothes-pin. The Canadians on all occasions termed them "savages;" and they adopted the epithet, unsuspecting of the implied opprobrium. . .

The path we followed had been but once previously traversed by civilized man. It leads over the crest of the Snowy Range,¹ which at a point about twenty miles north of Mount Rainier, seems practicable for horses during four or five months of the year; and indeed the chief obstacle arises from young spruces, that prevent the snow from settling around them in a solid mass. The passage was accomplished by transferring the luggage from the horses to the natives, an extra number being then engaged for this purpose. It did not appear to have been remarked that there were slaves in the party; and I afterwards had some reason to suspect that one man had been overloaded. However they got through wonderfully well, and were admitted by general consent to have surpassed the Polynesians. The mode of carrying burdens was the same so general in America, by means of a strap around the forehead.

Most of the horses eventually got through in safety. But in the mean time Lachemere, a native, was sent forward to find a chief, who resided at some distance below; and from whom we proposed to purchase additional horses. Lachemere, although, according to his own account, in part Walla Walla, considered himself as belonging to the Nisqualli tribe. He bore a high character among the residents; and accompanied us through the whole of our journey; and proved, with Pierre Charles, the Canadian, the main reliance of our party.

We now proceeded along the banks of the Spigen,² and after two days fell in with the chief we were in search of, who awaited our approach. He was seated under a tree, in a pleasant spot of open ground, where some horses were grazing; and he received us with all the state and dignity attributed to the former "sachems" of New England. His features were of the aboriginal type strongly pronounced, and in fact not unlike the portraits of Red-Jacket, the Iroquois chief. He inquired "who was the greatest man," our leader or the principal of the Hudson Bay Company: and he said that "his heart was good, and that his people did not kill anybody." On mentioning a theft committed by one of

1 Cascade Range.

2 Naches River.

the natives then present, he at first assumed a severe look, but afterwards said, "that as he belonged to another tribe, he could do nothing with him." He traced on the sand a map of the country through which we were to pass; and he gave us news from Walla Walla, of the death of the superintendent of the fort. The interpreter added, that the chief's "people lived altogether in one town; and that he was formerly a very wicked man, though now a great friend to the Whites, having been converted by the missionaries."

Having procured two or three additional horses, we left the Spipen; and turning northward, proceeded over a high rolling country, arid and barren, and for the most part destitute of trees. On the first elevated ground we fell in with an encampment of about fifty natives, chiefly women and children, engaged in procuring and drying biscuit-root; which was found to be a tolerable substitute for bread.

On the following day, we looked down into a broad valley, which proved to be that of the Upper Yakima. In descending, we were met by some men on horseback, and we here experienced the inconvenience of a multiplicity of languages. A native had joined us on the Spipen; but although living so near, he was able to communicate with these persons only through a third language, known to Lachemere, and by him, through the traders' jargon, to the Canadians; and as the latter spoke only Canadian French, the substance finally reached the English through the medium of five interpreters! Our new friends conducted us to a considerable encampment on the river-bank, where we procured an acceptable supply of salmon. The pride of the village was an aboriginal belle, and we were permitted a sight of herself and finery; her dress was of buckskin, and entirely resembled the Oregon female dress figured in the fourth volume of the *Narrative*. There were no canoes; and, as the stream was swollen, recourse was had to our portable balsas: and, in the midst of our operations, an ingenious attempt at theft failed of success. At this place we first met with water-tight baskets.

We had been led to anticipate "oppressive heat in the interior plains," but on the following morning, June 3rd, we were surprised with a fall of pellets of snow. Leaving the low grounds, the latter half of this day was taken up in the gradual ascent of the broad opposing ridge, on the summit of which we encamped;

the barometer, unexpectedly, indicating a greater elevation than we had hitherto reached.

On the morning of the 4th, we soon reached the eastern declivity, and obtained a distant view of the Columbia River, or rather of its position; for we could only see an enormous trench, winding through the lower country. Indeed, the Columbia and its main branches are everywhere sunk from one to two thousand feet below the general level of the country, so that Interior Oregon is in reality a table-land.

Continuing the descent, we arrived in the afternoon at the margin of the river, a little below the mouth of the Piscous³. The junction of this large stream had given rise to an unusual circumstance, a spot of ground that admitted of cultivation. A portion of it was planted with potatoes; but we hunted grouse for some time around the place before remarking the cabins of the proprietors.

For two days we proceeded along the western bank of the Columbia; having been delayed in the first place by the Piscous, waiting for a canoe; and some twenty miles above, another stream required the same convenience. A little beyond, some natives were established, then engaged in taking salmon; and Mr. Breckenridge observed the mode of burial, which "differed essentially from the Chinook, the graves being marked by a heap of stones surrounding an upright post." It was necessary to cross the main Columbia; and these natives having become dissatisfied, from some unknown cause, the chief saying "his heart is bad," were unwilling to lend us a canoe, until they unexpectedly found us independent of them, in some measure, by the possession of balsas. One of the Canadians lost his gun; but it appeared literally to have been borrowed without leave, as subsequently, at the Company's Post, it was considered recoverable.

On the 7th, [June] we left the river and ascended to the plain above; where we passed the night without water, except a little we had brought with us, and almost without fuel. The country was more level than that west of the Columbia, and somewhat green and grassy; and, but for the scarcity of water, seemed well enough adapted for pasturage.

On the 8th, [June] we arrived at Okonagan, where we found two White men, Canadians, and the usual accompaniments of a trading post, numerous half-breeds, and a small encampment of natives outside the stockade. Three or four "bateaus," of a

³ Wenatchee River.

similar construction to our river-boats of burden, were laid up on the bank. Canadians, it appears, are exclusively employed in navigating the Columbia; for the knowledge the natives have of the river is local, extending only to particular sections.

On the bank of the Okonagan River, a large tributary which enters the Columbia at this place, I observed a "sweating-house." It was low, rounded, and covered with clay, affording scarcely room for more than a single person; and it might readily have been mistaken for the work of a beaver or some similar animal. The steam was said to be produced by means of heated stones.

We remained a day or two at the fort, and then re-ascended to the grassy plain. Saline efflorescences were occasionally mixed with the soil, yet was not found to effect sensibly the water of the district. This was especially remarkable in the bottom of the "Grande Coulee," where were ponds or small lakes without outlets.

We sometimes got a view of distant hills to the North, on the borders of the country, which is here called New Caledonia.⁴ We were told that these saline efflorescences extend into New Caledonia; and reference was also made to sudden variations in the weather in that country, "the ground being one day covered with a foot of snow, while on the following the green grass would be visible." It is an elevated region, shut out from the coast by the Snowy Range of mountains; and, from a box of minerals which was shown me at Okonagan, its geological structure appears to be Primitive or Granitic.

We saw no natives until we reached the mouth of the Spokane; and indeed throughout our whole journey, natives were only met with where I have specified; a circumstance that will convey an idea of the scarcity of inhabitants in Interior Oregon.

Scattered pines make their appearance along the Columbia as low down as the point where we first met the river, but after crossing the Spokane, I found them more abundant, and not confined to the immediate banks; presenting, with the absence of undergrowth, natural parks, and some unexpected analogy to the Australian woods. A single lodge was seen on the margin of the Columbia; and as we approached Colville, two natives called to us from the opposite bank. Colville is almost a village, containing an outside row of buildings for the accommodation of the Whites and half-breeds in the service of the Company; while the peculiar local circumstances at the head of the "Kettle Falls"

⁴ British Columbia.

permit the establishment of a farm. Our horses having been brought up among the aboriginals, were quite unused to these signs of civilization.

We remained three days at the fort, and then proceeded south about sixty miles, to Chimikane, the recent establishment of Messrs. Eels and Walker, of the American Mission. At a point about half-way we found an encampment of natives, where a woman, in place of the Chinook plan of suspension, was swinging her child from side to side; and where we saw wampum made from bird bones, and some tons of "kamas root," stored in sacks neatly made of matting. In this district, the natives "cut down the pines for the sake of the black lichen (*Alectoria?*) which grows upon them, and which is made into bread, or mixed with kamas in a sort of pudding."

The Missionaries stated, that the "winter here began about the 1st of November, and lasted till the middle of March; and that there was frost on the preceding 4th of June. But flowers, notwithstanding, were to be found in the middle of February."

A fine-looking old chief, well known from his respectable character, and from his having been a great friend to the Whites, joined our party at this place. He belonged to the tribe called Ponderey⁵ by the Canadians, which inhabit a district to the eastward.

On the 21st of June, we again set out, and, after proceeding about ten miles, we recrossed the Spokane by means of a canoe left for the convenience of travelers. This river, throughout the greater part of its course, very nearly coincides with the boundary of the open country. To the eastward of the Spokane, the surface is more broken and hilly, with rocks and scattered trees; a portion of territory sometimes called the "Blue Mountains." On the other hand, the plain intervening between the Spokane and the junction of the two branches of the Columbia is so monotonous, that "a native guide has hitherto been found always necessary in crossing it."

Our course was now parallel with the river; and on the second day we came upon a large encampment, containing about twenty lodges, and perhaps three hundred natives. They were engaged in procuring kamas, while numbers of horses were feeding around. Some of the lodges were, as usual, of mats; and to my surprise I saw also buffalo robes, and conical skin-lodges, like those used on the Missouri. This place, however, is not with-

⁵ Pend Oreille.

in the range of the buffalo, although apparently well adapted for them; and but "a single instance was on record of a stray animal having been seen in the vicinity of Colville." Ever since leaving the Snowy Mountains, we had heard of natives being absent "in the buffalo country," but we now for the first time saw evidence of these visits.

For some unexplained cause, game is almost wanting in Interior Oregon; and in the course of a journey of eight hundred miles, the only large quadruped we saw was a solitary wolf. Antelopes, however, are occasionally procured by the natives. Notwithstanding, therefore, the "moccasin" and original "buckskin pantaloons," the Oregon natives hardly merit the name of hunting tribes; neither, indeed, can they be strictly be termed wanderers. Salmon forms their principal resource, eked out with kamas and other roots, so that a certain round becomes necessary in procuring subsistence; but a tribe always occupies the same station at the same season of the year. Since the introduction of horses (derived from the Spaniards of New Mexico), pasturage has in some degree influenced the selection.

A half-breed was living as a "free-trapper" with the band in question; the first instance of the kind we had met with. He stated, that "the party had come from the upper part of the Spokane River: also, that beaver were formerly common in all these streams, and were caught by the natives by setting baskets; but owing to the introduction of beaver-traps, they had become almost extinct."

On the following day we passed a similar though smaller encampment, but, being desirous of avoiding unnecessary trouble, we did not visit it. Further on, we met a party in motion, with all their horses and other property. Infants on the board were suspended to the flanks of the horses, a practice said to be "derived from the eastern side of the mountains;" and the lodge-poles were disposed in such a manner that one end was left trailing on the ground. Several of the horses were spotted black and white, such being favorites with the Oregon natives.

On the 25th [June] we arrived at Lapwai, the mission establishment of Mr. Spalding, situated on the Kooskoosky River.⁶ This was the first stream flowing into the Western Ocean, reached by Lewis and Clarke; and "the tradition of that expedition still remains among the natives; of surprise at the personal appearance of the new-comers, and at the sight of strong beards."

⁶ Native name for Clearwater River.

Nevertheless, it was said that "no idea of difference of race, such as is recognized by Europeans, ever enters into the heads of the natives." Several ladies of the American mission had traveled by land from the United States; and they were, I think, the first White females seen in Oregon.

In the mission-house we had a meeting of natives, to whom some of the principal events of our voyage were narrated; and with the aid of a map, they seemed entirely to comprehend the course. As some shadow of governmental protection might be useful to residents in this remote quarter, the occasion of our visit was stated in these words: "our great father had sent out his ships to look after his children in all parts of the world." In return, they gave us some specimens of native eloquence, which however did not come up to our anticipations; the burden of their story seemed to be, that "they were themselves a poor miserable people." No one can be regarded as altogether safe in the "Indian country;" and, from some superstitious idea, a member of the Hudson Bay Company had been recently assassinated.

Mr. Spalding had neat cattle and sheep, which thrive remarkably well; also a mill and plot of ground cultivated by irrigation, a novel idea to the farmer from the United States. A field of wheat looked remarkably well, as also various garden vegetables; and maize succeeds here, and even it is said at Colville, although it had hitherto failed on the coast. Many of the natives had followed Mr. Spalding's example, and he gave them the character generally of being "an exceedingly industrious people." Here was abundant evidence, were any needed, that the North American tribes are in nowise averse to the arts of civilization, or devoid in any respect of the common attributes of humanity.

The plantations of the natives, situated in a small lateral valley, were visited on the following morning. One man had adopted entirely the customs of the Whites, having built himself a comfortable log-house, while his wife, an interesting-looking woman, was neatly attired in the European fashion. The little valley seemed, in fact, an earthly paradise, which I could not quit without misgivings as to the future.

After proceeding about fifteen miles, we arrived at the forks, having passed on the way not less than a thousand horses distributed over the country in scattered bands, while others were here undergoing the process of furnishing hairs for halters. The

natives, to the number of some forty families, were congregated in a single circular building formed of rails; and, after some delay, they furnished us with canoes, by the aid of which we crossed the Shoshonee,⁷ or great southern branch of the Columbia. A similar building to the last was seen a few miles below on the opposite bank; but our path soon diverged from the vicinity of the river.

On the third day, we reached the waters of the Walla-Walla River at a place where we found I think one or more native habitations, and in the evening we arrived at the Fort, which is situated a few miles below the junction of the two branches of the Columbia. Various games were as usual going on outside, some requiring skill and agility, but all apparently having gambling for their foundation, and this seems to be the "business of life" with the natives, when they encamp around the forts.

We saw here a waggon, the first that had been driven all the way from Missouri, and during our three days' stay, a White man in the service of the Company arrived from the "Snake Country." We also received a visit from Mr. Gray and Dr. Whitman, from the American Mission Station, which was several miles distant.

The multiplicity of languages in Oregon, is even greater than in the Eastern part of North America, and is clearly independent of peaceful relations. In this respect a striking contrast is presented with Polynesia, where, in spite of the geographical isolation, a similarity of language prevails over a wider space than in any other part of the globe. . . .

On the 4th of July, we proceeded on our journey, and crossing the main Columbia, we again entered the valley of the Yakima. On the following day we crossed this river with the aid of a canoe, at the residence of a single family. A small canopy, hardly sufficient to shelter a sheep, was found to contain four generations of human beings, seated in the posture which takes up the least possible room. They had just returned from procuring their day's subsistence, which consisted of the berries of the Cornus, and the insight into aboriginal life was by no means prepossessing. Nevertheless, the attentions bestowed on the eldest of the party showed an interesting trait in the native character, in strong contrast with the conduct of the Polynesians. I remarked also, that the eldest alone had the cartilage of the nose pierced.

⁷ Snake River.

The country, as throughout a great part of the interior, did not appear to become green at any part of the year, but presented a hoary aspect, chiefly from the prevalence of *Artemisia*. The river was observed to pass the minor transverse ridges, very much as the Potomac and Susquehanna do the different ranges of the Alleghanies; and it pretty uniformly receives a tributary just prior to entering the gaps. On the 7th, [July] we arrived at the forks, where the Yakima seemed fordable at this season, but we did not make the attempt, as we were able to avail ourselves of a canoe belonging to a native family.

We now proceeded up the banks of its tributary, the Spipen,⁸ the valley gradually narrowing and the hills beginning to assume a tint of green, while trees once more made their appearance. On the 8th, we fell in with our acquaintance, the chief who formerly sold us horses, and he joined our party for the remainder of the journey. His "town" consisted of only five or six cabins, so that his influence did not appear to be widely extended. One of his sons came on horseback to meet us, and exhibited the same exuberance of spirits we often remark at home in young men who regard themselves a little elevated by fortune. A few miles above we regained our former path.

We had no difficulty in crossing the mountain ridge, for the snow was now mostly gone from the summit, exposing unexpectedly an undergrowth of bushes. We were again interested in the virtues of native character, on the occasion of meeting a party carrying along a dying man.

The streams to the westward of the ridge having now subsided, we got on more rapidly than before. About twenty miles from the coast a portion of the Nisqualli tribe had established themselves for some temporary purpose. At our last encampment, before parting with our natives, the idea of initiating them in gymnastic exercises was somehow taken up, and they entered into the sport very willingly, and with some spirit.

On the 15th, [July, 1841,] we reached the Fort and rejoined the Vincennes; previously, however, being somewhat surprised at our horses going into salt water to drink, at a place too where small sharks, flounders, and other marine fish are abundantly taken. The circumstance, however, was not regarded as unusual by the people on shore.

⁸ Naches.